

*Comm-entary* ~ Spring 2008

***Comm-entary***

**2007-2008**

**The UNH Student Journal of  
Communication**

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*Comm-entary would like to extend many thanks to the faculty and students within the Communication Department for their efforts and patience. We are also grateful for the support of the Student Press Organization and the Student Activity Fee Committee for their funding efforts. We would also like to thank University Printing Services for their cooperation and assistance.*

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## **Truth and Falsity: Taking a Social Constructionist Standpoint**

**Kirstyn Peterson**

**"It once seemed easy enough to distinguish between truth and falsity. Yet those days have largely vanished, as television, radio, books, newspapers, e-mail and passing acquaintances inundate us with differences in perspective, value and understanding."-Kenneth Gergen, pg 2**

It has long been believed in our culture that there is reality or the "real" world, and then there is the unrealistic dream world filled with fantasies of the way things could be. But what exactly is reality? Can we point to what is real and what is fake? Is it all a matter of opinion or are there truly concrete and objective facts? Why do we assume that "the way things could be" can never be? In this paper I will question the commonly assumed facts and truths of our world and closely examine culture's role in defining reality. I aim, however, not to dismiss the term reality entirely, but rather to reconstruct the phrase to constitute that there is not only one reality, but many. This examination of manifold truths is also known as Social Construction.

Adopting a social constructionist view can be a very radical and thought provoking-process. Instead of viewing the world as a set of concrete practices and facts, social constructionism offers a more open-ended way of viewing the objects, events and processes in our world. As Vivien Burr states "It insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken for granted ways of understanding the world, including

ourselves” (2). Because this action goes against our presumed ways of thinking it can prove to be fairly difficult at first, mainly because of how our dominant cultural discourses engrain particular beliefs, values, and morals into our creation of self. By creation of self, I am referring to a common social constructionist belief that our interactions play an active role in shaping our identity. Constructionists assume that nothing is final or has a definite way of being, but that there are multiple truths and realities. Therefore there is no absolute definition of right or wrong, good or bad, real or fake. A relational orientation, where focus is on the process by which we collectively create meanings, truths and rituals, can help lead us out of strict social boundaries and into a world with a more profound understanding of others. In Burr’s words, “Social Constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be” (3).

The belief that our world consists of universal truths, or facts that are true for everyone is common. Although, Burr points out that, “within social constructionism there can be no such thing as an objective fact, because all knowledge is derived from looking at the world from some perspective or another” (6). For example, just the other day I was waiting for one of my classes to begin and started complaining about how hot it was in the classroom. To my surprise however, my classmate was protesting that it was extremely cold. So who is right? Even though I perceived it to be factual that the room was warm, who am I to contest another’s reality? Every person has a different way of relating to the objects, actions and processes in our world based on the varying cultures, knowledge, experiences and interactions in which they have engaged. This example shows that even concepts that are considered to be “scientific”, such as temperature can vary from individual to individual. As Kenneth Gergen claims, there are “no means of knowing

‘what’s inside the mind’ or determining whose mind is reflecting reality more or less accurately”(10). Often in our society, science and technology are thought not to be questioned and placed high on the objective pedestal. We never really stop to think why interpretations from scientists are considered evidence of “the truth” while our personal interpretations are juvenile and unprofessional in comparison. Gergen explores the idea that these ultimate truths might be used as a strategy for institutions, such as science, to remain powerful. He notes that, “the language of objective reality is essentially used as a means of generating hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion” (Gergen 73).

On the other hand, consider the constant debate between the organizations of science and religion. Both are deemed to be powerful social institutions; however they both boast severely different theories regarding the creation of life on earth. Here is a debate where the “correct” viewpoint is not easy to determine. Burr notes that, “a lot of things we take for granted as given, fixed and immutable, whether in ourselves or in the phenomena we experience, can upon inspection be found to be socially derived and socially maintained”(45). This idea circles back to the point that social constructionism is not concerned with finding the “right” analysis, but in observing how different communities (the church or scientists for example) create different realities through their unique social cultures and relational interactions.

Gergen muses that communities which create realities congenial to their own traditions are establishing those realities as “true and good”. This works to devalue and exclude members of that community with different traditions. It is here we can see the importance that social establishments hold over communities and the values they produce as social norms. This reminds me of McLean, NY the small village I grew up in. It

consisted only of a tiny church that most community members attended, an inn, a fire station, a grade school, and a quilting store. The neighborhood's inhabitants had a close relationship with one another and were well aware of the distinctive values and morals expected of them and citizens. Regardless, one day an investor came into town and purchased the long abandoned Elm Tree Inn and Restaurant. The entire village was overjoyed to see their beloved landmark reopen. However, to the shock and horror of the community, when the restaurant finally did open it was no longer the Elm Tree Inn but Siren's: the topless bar and strip club. The village was outraged and united together to protest this new threat to their ideologies through pickets, fundraisers, town meetings, and even by confronting visitors to the bar upon their exit. Eventually the bar was shut down for improper conduct due to the diligent work of village members, and the neighborhood resumed its "normative state". This example shows how powerful a community's "truth" can be in fashioning participant behaviors. You would have been immediately outcast from McLean's socially accepted sphere by even setting foot in Siren's. However, think of how other communities (for example, the strip in Las Vegas) might respond to a similar establishment. Would there be the same reaction? Does that community hold the same values? Dominant social discourses are constantly causing us to react and adapt to our socially appropriate identities. This raises the question of whether our beliefs, morals and values are steadfast or shifting? Do we have to choose just one "true" identity, or is it possible to relate and interact with many communities?

Stop for a second and think of all the words you would use to describe yourself. Do you display all these traits constantly, or does it depend on the context and company in which you are? My guess is that a self identified happy person will not constantly be cheerful and a self identified empathetic



person will not always be viewed as kind. Social Constructionists critique closely the idea of identity and personality. "We think of our personality as more or less unified and stable," explains Burr (110). Most of us feel we are born with certain traits that account for the way we react in multiple situations. However, the concept of personality is a rather abstract one. Burr offers that, "there is no objective evidence that you can appeal to which would demonstrate the existence of your personality" (110). It is not a biological organ or component of your brain. We create the illusion of personality through our language.

Social constructionists suggest that the way we act depends entirely on the context of our relationships. According to Burr, "we behave, think and feel differently depending on who we are with, what we are doing and why" (110). For example, when I used to live in New York I would describe myself as a tomboy who played soccer that never dressed up or wore make-up. I was loud and unafraid that other classmates might label me "weird" or "strange". A lot of this had to do with my good friends whom had similar interests that I had established at an early age. I knew they accepted me and enjoyed my "personality" the way it was. However, when I entered the ninth grade, my family decided to move to Maine where I had to start high school without the important social support of my friends. I became nervous that my identity would not be as easily accepted in this new environment. So I began to adapt my personality. I started wearing makeup and feminine clothing until eventually I was the total opposite of my previous identity. I participated on the soccer team my freshman year, but soon abandoned my once signature sport to join the cheerleading squad. I had changed my appearance, my interests, my way of speaking, and my entire idea of self. I had become a completely different person. Or had I? Who's to say that my

tomboy identity is any more “true” or “false” than my feminine identity? At the time I had equated it to just the process of growing up and maturing, but after researching the social constructionist perspectives I can see how my switch in social environments played a massive role in shaping my new identity. Even today as a college student, I claim a different identity than the one I classified myself with in high school.

We are constantly changing how we want others to view us in certain situations. We might want to be viewed as fun and outgoing to our friends while simultaneously seen as smart and professional to a possible employer. Therefore the concept of identity is not unvarying, but a process that is continuously changing and evolving through interactions and the meanings we create from them.

In effect, social constructionism is an innovative and unbiased way to approach reality and come through enlightened. If we can diverge from our own individual path's, we are then free to delve into alternate ways to think about our conceptions of what is true. It is helpful to consider this process when we find it hard to break free of rigid judgments and attempt to solve ignorance through thoughtful interaction. Though the concept may at first be challenging, it is worth the effort to gain a greater understanding of how what we do together and the ways in which we interact construct our reality.

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## **Expanded Media Effect on the Image of Bush versus Reagan**

**David J. Bettencourt**

In chapter fourteen of "Lowering the Political Hero to Our Level," Joshua Meyrowitz's study on the impact of electronic media on social behavior, he makes the claim that the post Watergate decline in

"presidential image may have surprisingly little to do with a lack of potentially great leaders, and much more to do with a specific communication environment (a wider distribution of media coverage and an increase in the diversity of simultaneous audiences)...that undermines the politicians ability to behave like, and therefore be perceived as, the traditional great leader."  
(Meyrowitz)

Meyrowitz maintains that in the nineteenth century American politicians were provided greater opportunities to critique, practice, and perfect their addresses because their engagements were generally smaller and were not broadcasted or televised. If such events were covered they generally stayed local or regional. This helped to tamp down negative media generated by speaker mistakes or miscues. Today, however, as Meyrowitz explains, "any slip of the tongue is amplified in significance because of the millions of people who have witnessed it" (Meyrowitz). This expanded media coverage and its ability to shape the public image of a President is greater today than it was when Meyrowitz wrote his analysis in 1986. My primary test case will be to examine the perception of Ronald Reagan as the

“Great Communicator” versus George W. Bush as the “Dyslexic-in-Chief,” specifically looking at the coverage of their clumsy social errors, also known as gaffes. While President Bush has garnered fame for his verbal gaffes and embarrassing moments, his predecessor Ronald Reagan’s frequent miscues often went unnoticed. I maintain that Bush’s “fame” has come about because of expanded and new sources of media: the invention of news-based websites (specifically Drudge Report) and the vast expansion of twenty-four hour news channels such as CNN and Fox News.

The comparison of Reagan and Bush extends beyond a simple comparison of one president against another. The media expansion of the 1980s resembles in many ways the expansion of media in the 2000s. The 1980s saw the rise of the first twenty-four hour news channel in CNN, the FCC’s authorization of commercial cellular service, the debut of MTV, and the launch of “America Online.” All of these developments were seen as ‘remarkably advanced’ and contributed to the expansion of media coverage (Gilbert 4). In the first seven years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have seen a vast expansion of technologies that have permanently altered the ways the media covers, reports, and distributes events to the public. I believe that while Meyrowitz is correct that every president beginning with Lyndon Johnson has been “brought down to our level” by the expansion of media, it seems that some presidents fall harder than others. The three biggest factors responsible for this are news-based websites, blogs, YouTube, and the vast expansion of twenty-four hour news channels. Each of these has contributed to President Bush’s image as a poor public speaker and each of these were factors that President Reagan did not have to contend with in the 1980s.

In 1994, internet journalist Matt Drudge launched his news-based website called The Drudge Report. The Drudge

Report mixes investigative journalism with links to stories from the US and international mainstream media about politics, entertainment, and current events as well as links to many popular columnists. It gained fame when in 1996 it broke the story of a relationship between Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinski. It was also the media outlet most responsible for the wide dissemination of George Bush's first major gaffe. During a campaign stop in the 2000 election, Bush inadvertently referred to New York Times reporter Adam Clymer as "a major league asshole." While the story was widely reported on the major networks and newspapers, it was Drudge that fueled the increase in the story's spread. Blazoned across his website on September 4<sup>th</sup> was the headline, "Bush curses at Times Reporter." It was then updated a day later (September 5<sup>th</sup>) to read: "Bush audio: Clymer... 'Major league \*\*\*hole.'" The link for both stories went to the CBS website which featured an audio clip for listeners to hear Bush's live words. CBS' link had over three thousand more "hits" (visits by internet goers) than the page ABC or NBC had dedicated for the story. This discrepancy in hits was largely credited to Drudge for his efforts to make the audio recording of Bush's comment accessible to the public. Hearing Bush's actual comments, as opposed to simply reading them, made him sound careless and lacking a proper vernacular. This was the beginning of Bush's public speaking troubles.

Drudge and other blogs also helped to bring to light later Bush gaffes, such as when Bush said, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job," to FEMA director Michael Brown after Brown had botched operations to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina. Another slip was when Bush said, "too many good docs are getting out of the business. Too many OB-GYNs aren't able to practice their love with women all across this country." Bush also said, "If this were a dictatorship, it'd be a heck of a lot

easier, just so long as I'm the dictator." The Drudge Report prominently featured each of these stories and linked them to audio or video clips.

Bush isn't the only one who has been caught making open microphone gaffes. A forgotten live microphone was also responsible for Ronald Reagan's "biggest gaffe." At the height of the Cold War in 1984 Reagan was about to do a radio interview, and, unaware that the microphone was already on, joked, "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." The comment set off a fire storm in the media and was used by Reagan's opponents to support claims that he was reckless. However, while political criticism helped keep the story alive it was largely a two-day story for the media (Leuchtenburg, 55). Although audio was played on network TV and the words were printed in newspapers, there was no internet, website or blog such as Drudge Report to further broadcast his comments. If Americans missed the story on the evening news, it would've been difficult to find an alternative source to hear Reagan's comments. Three months later Reagan defeated Walter Mondale for a second term with his "Great Communicator" image intact. Today, Reagan's comments can be found in some internet encyclopedias, but have largely been forgotten.

In his book, Drudge Manifesto, Drudge admits that during Reagan's presidency the stories he "would've pounced on" were the ones that featured presidential gaffes, such as "Reagan forgetting who his HUD director was and calling him Mr. Mayor" (Drudge). It seems unlikely the "Great Communicator" would have slipped under the radar of Matt Drudge and bloggers.

In mid-2006 three employees of the e-commerce business PayPal created a video sharing website called

YouTube. The purpose of the site was to display a wide variety of video content, including movie clips, TV clips, and music videos, as well as amateur content and short original videos. While its goal was simple, its implications for politicians have been vast. On May 8, 2007 President Bush was delivering some remarks to the Queen of England on the occasion of her visit to America when he made the mistake of breaching official etiquette by winking at the queen to cover for a previous verbal slip (Bush came perilously close to suggesting that she had toured America in 1776). Traditionally, if one missed this story on the news, one could not easily watch it again. However, because of YouTube, interested viewers could search for the clip and watch it as many times as they desired. The clip is currently posted on the site by six different users and has been viewed by over a hundred million people.

While this incident was labeled a “Bushism,” The “Great Communicator” found himself having similar difficulties presenting himself in a positive way during his first debate with Walter Mondale in the 1984 presidential election. During the debate Reagan rambled, stalled, and huffed nervously as he struggled to answer even simple questions. The performance again called into question Reagan’s stability and the suggestion that he might be “losing it” emerged (Leuchtenburg, 57). However, first impressions are sometimes misleading and while the media felt Reagan had done poorly, the public felt differently. While the media labeled the debate a “landslide Mondale victory,” the public felt that while Mondale was “sharp”, Reagan did nothing “to disqualify himself from my vote.” (Leuchtenburg, 57). Had YouTube been in existence in 1984 the public may have had a much different perception of Reagan after the debate. YouTube would have allowed viewers to view Reagan’s rougher moments repeatedly, whereas for most people the actual debate could only be viewed once and his blunders



had a greater chance of going unnoticed. There was a possibility for a second viewing if the news covered the story of the debate the next day, but the number of times somebody could've viewed the debate if YouTube had existed would've been much higher. Seeing Reagan stumble continuously on YouTube may have hardened the idea that Reagan had "lost it" and hurt his image as an effective communicator, and possibly could've cost him the election. Reagan benefited from the lack of news websites and twenty-four hour news channels.

While CNN has been in existence since 1980, its effects, as well as those of Fox News, on political figures are relatively new. Combined, these networks provide a constant stream of news coverage. While traditional news reports on the major networks in the 1980s (ABC, NBC, and CBS) were restrained to reporting the major news stories of the day, today these new twenty-four hour networks can report on stories that are important but typically excluded on the traditional networks. These networks have contributed significantly to Bush's poor speaker image.

On September 7, 2007 Bush addressed business leaders at the APEC summit of world leaders in Australia when he opened his address by thanking the host, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, for hosting the "OPEC summit". After laughs from the audience, President Bush corrected his *faux pas* by saying, "He invited me to the OPEC summit next year", and laughed. He also gaffed when he said Australia was a member of OPEC. This was not a major speech for Bush and the trip itself was routine, but both Fox News and MSNBC were covering the speech live. Capturing the gaffe, they made it available to their local networks and the mistake became a topic on several blogs (Drudge included) and was covered by most print media. YouTube has the clip of the incident posted by sixteen different users and has received over 6 million hits. All

of the Americans who posted the clip got it from Fox News, MSNBC, or CNN. For Reagan in the 1980s such intense media coverage of a routine speech did not exist. In fact, during his famous "Evil Empire" speech networks cut their coverage and missed the last fifteen minutes of the speech. Had Reagan been subjected to such intense twenty-four hour media coverage, his remarks in mundane speeches such as: "We are trying to get unemployment to go up, and I think we're going to succeed," "All the waste in a year from a nuclear power plant can be stored under a desk," and "She's [Margaret Thatcher] the best man," would have been widely reported and used as stories for other networks to report on. (none of these clips currently appears on YouTube). If expanded media coverage can cause a blunder as simple as confusing acronyms to hurt the image of George Bush, there is little doubt that Reagan's recognition as a great speaker would've been diminished if he'd also been forced to contend with sources such as CNN and YouTube.

In conclusion, while Joshua Meyrowitz laments that the new communication environment means politicians are less likely to deal in specifics, I believe an equally lamentable feature of the new media is the misrepresentation of a candidates abilities and the deprivation of their ability to be human and make mistakes. A comparison of the coverage of President Bush's gaffes as opposed to President Reagan's shows a greater ability for the new media to craft the image of a president currently than in the past. While Reagan seems likely to remain the "Great Communicator," it is interesting to speculate whether George Bush's stature as a speaker will improve in the future at the expense of future presidents.

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*Note:* References to headlines on Drudge Report were retrieved  
from the sites archives

# **Parody Advertisements in American Culture**

**Vanessa Williams**

In today's society, advertisements constitute a major part of the average American's life. Typically, most American adults spend roughly 70% of their daily routine in the presence of advertising (Bordwell 240). These advertisements reflect a multitude of cultural values and play an important part in forming the ideas, choices, and values that consumers are able to construct. In recent years, however, anti-advertisements have played a major role in the attempt to dissociate the widespread beliefs of corporations and private interest groups while encouraging the American public to think critically about the implications of contemporary advertising. Using concepts such as ideology, semiotics, counter-hegemonic forces, and cultural appropriation, one can determine how anti-advertisements can manipulate certain images and texts to encourage the American public to construct culturally critical views towards the dominant ideologies held by private interest groups. This paper seeks to demonstrate how these concepts can be useful in analyzing a specific anti-ad constructed by <http://parody.organique.com> toward the Shell® oil company.

In order to understand the function of these ads, one must first view the anti-ad at face value. This anti-ad was one of many constructed by numerous contributors on <http://parody.organique.com> as part of a site entitled "False Advertising." It shows various spoof ads for any viewer to see. This specific anti-ad displays an untainted natural environment with a textual message across it that reads, "If there's oil here,

we'll find it." Beneath this textual message at the bottom of the anti-ad is the logo and name of the Shell® oil company.



To understand this concept, one must first be familiar with the concept of ideology. Ideologies are “the shared set of values and beliefs that exist within a given society and through which individuals live out their relations to social institutions and structures” (Sturken and Cartwright 357). Ideologies are often deeply and unconsciously ingrained within the consumer’s mind. Most advertisements play upon ideologies. As such, anti-ads try to bring these commonly held ideologies into our public consciousness. The Shell® anti-ad plays upon the recent cultural controversy concerning oil drilling in Alaska and other natural environments that are believed to be rich in this resource. Oil companies tend to focus their advertisements on cost efficient oil production and claim to only drill in sites that would maximize the potential for oil use at the lowest cost to the environment. Their ads aim to get the general public to truly trust that the companies are doing everything in their power to search for more oil sites that would be safe and beneficial to drill on. Because most of the American public has become

accustomed to believing these ideologies, the Shell® anti-ad speaks to the viewers in a way that gets them to semiotically make the connection that the Shell® oil company, and perhaps other big oil companies, are using beautiful and scarce lands, such as the ones displayed in the ad, for the sole purpose of cheap oil extraction.

With this information, the American public is able to gain a sense of the connotative meaning of the ad, which is “all the social, cultural, and historical meanings that are added to a sign’s literal meaning” (Sturken and Cartwright 352).

Connotation makes it possible for the anti-ad producers to get across the other side of the ideology about oil production and use. “Connotation thus brings to an object or image the wider realm of ideology, cultural meaning, and value systems of a society” (Sturken and Cartwright 352). Through this anti-ad, one is able to take the literal meaning of the scene and textual message paired along with the Shell® logo to recognize that large corporations such as Shell® are in fact not particularly concerned for the environment as much as they are concerned about drilling for oil in cost-beneficial areas such as natural wildlife refuges. The practice of semiotics is one way that an individual can take signs and signified meanings to acquire a different, more eye-opening view of the ideologies behind companies such as Shell®.

After gaining a thorough understanding of how ideologies are developed through connotation, one must become familiar with the concept of semiotics. Semiotics is the process of using cultural ‘signs’ to convey certain meanings (Sturken and Cartwright 365-366). This technique is used constantly in both regular ads and anti-ads. Advertisements generally combine a ‘sign’ (an image or text displayed) with a ‘signified’ (general concept) that together constitute meaning (Sturken and Cartwright 29-30). For example, in the Shell® anti-ad, the

parody website uses the image of a fresh, clean landscape (sign) coupled with the phrase, "If there's oil here, we'll find it" (signified) to play on the viewer's subconscious in regards to oil ideologies (meaning).

In addition to semiotics and ideologies, counter-hegemonic forces are helpful in analyzing cultural artifacts. The concept of hegemony was conceived by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian writer and politician well versed in cultural analysis and theory. Hegemony embodies two components: "that dominant ideologies are often offered as 'common sense,' and that "dominant ideologies are in tension with other forces and hence constantly in flux" (Sturken and Cartwright 356-357). More often than not, however, hegemonic forces in American culture reflect the ideologies held by private interest groups, since they have the most access to the channels of communication. For example, those who wished to "advance personal interests [such as] oilmen [and] politicians...all sought to control or dominate discourse to their own ends. They spoke out again and again, repetition enhancing credibility" (Olien & Olien, 251). In America, oil continues to be one of driving factors of the nation's economy, and is therefore one of the dominant hegemonic forces within the country (Bromley 242). However, counter-hegemonic forces, such as the work of anti-ads, are able to "question the status quo of how things are...and [affect] social change in ways that may not favor the interests of the marketplace" (Sturken and Cartwright 54). Counter-hegemonic forces typically work against dominant ideologies, such as oil being good for the economy. By conveying to the audience that a natural refuge could be used for drilling by companies such as Shell®, the anti-ad works as a counter-hegemonic force since it encourages the viewer to dissociate from their inherent and dominant ideologies about drilling for oil as being beneficial to the economy, and instead replacing it with the idea that large oil

companies simply wish to fulfill their own desire to drill for more oil by any means. In general, anti-ads work as counter-hegemonic forces by working to break the common assumptions held by most of society while reinstating their wish for citizens to question their ideas and think for themselves.

Along with ideologies, semiotics, and counter-hegemonic forces, cultural appropriation is also useful in understanding cultural artifacts. Cultural appropriation is the act of taking others' meanings and ideas and using them as a valuable source of oppositional reading (Sturken and Cartwright 350). Anti-ads usually accomplish this by taking what the original advertisers use in their ads, such as texts or images, and re-appropriating the meaning(s) with their own subliminal message in order to dissociate the viewer from the ideologies imposed upon them by special interest groups like oil companies, in turn, allowing to think for themselves. By using the same resources of original ads in their own, newer versions, anti-ads are able to get the viewer's attention long enough to allow them to recognize the subtle, yet meaningful, differences between the original and the oppositional ad. Because the messages of advertisement can reach such a broad audience with little interference (Wernick, 38), anti-ads employ cultural appropriation tactics to incorporate new meanings which encourage the consumer to think critically about their own ideologies and choices. In the Shell® anti-ad, for example, the anti-advertisers have essentially "stolen" or "borrowed" the same Shell® logo that is used in authentic Shell® ads and put it together with images of natural environments to re-appropriate meaning. Through this, the anti-ad effectively helps the viewer develop a different view of oil companies and their interests. Through cultural appropriation, anti-ads are able to convey certain oppositional views toward dominant ideologies, usually held by private interest groups such as oil companies, in a way



that makes it easier to see the reality behind these hegemonic forces.

Through the use of concepts such as semiotics, counter-hegemony, and cultural appropriation, one is able to understand how anti-advertisements function in today's society. By applying these three important concepts to the Shell® anti-ad, one is able to see just how successful they can be at reducing the effectiveness of original advertisements used today by large corporations. Anti-ads, such as this one aimed at the Shell® oil company, attempt to change American's ideology from one imposed on them by public interest groups to one based in free thought and questioning of the status quo. Keeping these concepts in mind, one can aspire to examine other anti-ads in the public realm today in an attempt to discover the other, less clear cultural meanings within society.

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## The Press Rejects A Candidate... Again

Michael Soha

In 1992, relative unknown Larry Agran, ran for president in the Democratic presidential primary. As mayor of Irving, California, Agran did not have credentials of a typical candidate for president (i.e. national office). Yet Agran was not a typical local politician either. As executive director of the Center for Innovative Diplomacy, he played a unique role as a "global mayor" pursuing issues of international trade, arms reduction, and human rights. This earned Irving a United Nations award for ozone legislation - all from within deeply conservative Orange County. As media critic Joshua Meyrowitz exposes in *The Press Rejects A Candidate*, from the beginning, Agran was ignored by the press (Meyrowitz 1992). When Agran was reported on, he was treated as a long-shot, called a "dark horse," a "fringe candidate," and "an obscure contender." Agran was barred from most televised debates on the basis of, according to Meyrowitz, "criteria that seem to shift as he tries to meet them (1992)." When asked for their reasoning, media executives told Agran that he had not earned the right to media exposure because he had not received enough media exposure. Facing this circular argument, Agran found that the only way to become visible was to be disruptive, and to protest his exclusion from forums and debates. Nearing the primary election, Agran's support began to show in the polls where he would first tie well-knowns Jerry Brown (governor of California) and Tom Harkin (Iowa Senator), and later go on to actually pass Brown. Instead of reporting on Agran's stunning rise in the polls, the press simply left him out of their reports - either by skipping over him, jumping from Brown to Harkin, or by only reporting on the top three candidates. The New York Times even physically

cropped him out of an AP photo from a Democratic Party dinner, in which he was standing next to Tom Harkin, Paul Tsongas and Bill Clinton (1992).

Fast-forward to the present election, and the press is at it again. Take the case of Democratic presidential candidate, Mike Gravel. What is even more surprising in this case is that unlike Agran, Gravel held two terms in national office as a Senator representing Alaska. He is also well known for having helped secure the building of the trans-Alaska pipeline, which helped bring non-foreign oil into the mainland. Outside of Alaskan politics, he is perhaps best known for his role in making public the Pentagon Papers, which revealed that president Johnson was planning on expanding the Vietnam War after publicly promising not to. He also led a five month, one-man filibuster against the renewal of the military draft. As *The Nation* correspondent John Nichols described, Mike Gravel's political career shows him to be a "scrappy" contender who has little patience with the secrecy and compromises of official Washington (Nichols 2006). He is a war critic who has risked both the personal and political to end war - risking treason by publishing the Pentagon Papers (which took him all the way to the Supreme Court) and risking party loyalty by his unconventional get-it-done attitude (Nichols 2006). Gravel has spent the past decade developing The Democracy Foundation, through which he advocates for his National Initiative for Democracy reform, which would allow for national referendums on major public policy issues, as he believes that congress has failed to make any major policy changes in the past three decades (Lauria 2007). He also supports a radical tax reform initiative, replacing individual and corporate income taxes with a twenty three percent national sales tax on goods and services (Lauria 2007). Steadfastly opposed to the Vietnam war, he cosponsored a resolution in the Senate to cut off war

funding, an action he believes the current Democratically-led congress should do to end the Iraq war (Lauria 2007). At a time of widespread disappointment among anti-war democrats regarding the Democratically-led Congress's failure to end the war, it seems Gravel's unconventional, no holds barred approach to ending war would be attractive to voters.

However, after losing his US Senate seat during the conservative electoral landslide brought on by Reagan's 1980 sweep, Mike Gavel lacks national name recognition, and is viewed by the press as a fringe candidate at best. At worst, he is seen as a crazy, entertainment-only candidate, due to his antagonistic stance towards the top Democratic contenders, and his gutsy comments on the Iraq war (and a possible war with Iran). In the news media, most of his coverage consists of being joked at, frequently called such names as "a crazy uncle," "ninth-tier candidate," even "deranged." At the debates, he is rhetorically marginalized, asked almost no questions, and given little more than thirty seconds to answer before being cut off with a "thank you, Senator." The questions he does receive are often designed to create controversy between him and a "major" candidate, and have no bearing on his campaign or policies. He is even physically estranged by the media, consistently placed at the far end of either side in the candidate line up on stage. He has been barred by the sponsoring media from the final few debates, using, as was seen with Agran, inclusion criteria that seemed designed to exclude him. Again, like Agran, Gravel's only recourse, facing de facto exclusion, has been to try to be disruptive or create a spectacle for media attention. This presents Gravel with a no-win situation, as his attention-getting attempts are then focused on by the media to portray him as "comic relief" and of wholly entertainment value. Despite his decade of Senatorial experience, his historically and politically important anti-war accomplishments, and his outside-the-

system approach to Washington (at a time of widespread disillusionment with the administration and congress); Mike Gravel has been essentially rejected by the mainstream press as a viable candidate for the United States' presidency.

### **The (not so) Great Debates: Questions Fit For a Candidate?**

In the few debates which Gravel was allowed to participate, the questions given to him would often be phrased in such a way as to treat him as a non-serious candidate. In the South Carolina/MSNBC debate, NBC's moderator, Brian Williams, addressed Gravel as a paternal candidate, almost as if he was "Uncle Gravel," only there to give advice, and of course, to provide laughs. Williams asked him:

*Senator Gravel... You played a role in the fight to cut off money for the Vietnam War. What would be your advice, Senator, for the elected officials on this stage who are at a conflict, opposed to the conflict, but also feel the need to keep on funding the conflict?*

Not "what would you do as president to end the war?" but "what is your advice for the other candidates," - you know, the "real" candidates. Williams went on to ask Gravel about a statement he had made earlier in the year, in which Gravel exclaimed that he was not concerned if he won the election or not:

*Senator Gravel... shouldn't debates be for candidates who are in the race to win the race?*

What Williams did not include in his question, however, was the context. In his statement, Gravel had been explaining

that he was most concerned with getting his message about democracy reforms out, and that he knew his chances of winning were slim - *not* that he did not want to win or was not a serious candidate, as Williams implied. In another MSNBC debate, this time held in Dartmouth, New Hampshire, moderator Tim Russert asked Gravel:

*You were in the Senate, and you take credit for stopping the draft. If you were a senator right now, what advice would you give your colleagues still in Congress about how they can stop the war even though they don't have enough votes to stop a debate or to override a veto? What should they do?*

Again, just as Williams had in the previous debate, Russert focused on Gravel in terms of his "advice," stressing "what should *they* do (not you)?"

If not asking him questions portrayed him as an unserious candidate, the other major way Gravel was questioned seemed only intended to create controversy. Gravel is known as an against-the-mainstream candidate and an outspoken anti-war critic who often gives fiery responses concerning war. The sponsoring news media clearly designed questions to provoke Gravel, to essentially create a spectacle that would make an entertaining video clip or sound byte for the evening news. During the Manchester, New Hampshire CNN/WMUR debate, moderator Wolf Blitzer tried twice to instigate such a reaction from Gravel. He asked Gravel:

*Do you think someone who voted to authorize the president to go to war should be president of the United States?*

Gravel, answering calmly, "*not at all, it's a moral criteria...*" actually did not get into an adversarial tone, much to Blitzer's chagrin. For his second question, Blitzer asked Gravel:

*Very briefly, do you disagree with these other Democratic candidates (on the Iraq War)?*

Framing the question as Gravel against the "other Democratic candidates", Blitzer seemed to want Gravel to make another outlandish statement against the mainstream candidate's war policy. During the MSNBC debate at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, in one of the few questions Tim Russert addressed to Gravel, he asked:

*You filed for personal bankruptcy...how can someone who did not take care of his business, could not manage his own personal finances, say that he's capable of managing the country?*

Russert's question was designed to de-legitimize Gravel as a financial failure, but didn't Lincoln declare bankruptcy? What about our current President's business failings? Russert, the supposedly "objective" moderator, is essentially saying, "you are not fit to be president." Additionally, the question to Gravel was far out of tone with Russert's questions to the other candidates. Russert did not ask Barack Obama, for instance, "You've admitted to using cocaine, doesn't that render your judgment far from presidential worthy?" or Clinton "Your husband cheated on you, lied to the country about it, and yet you continued to stand by his side, should we trust your judgment as president?"

The most obvious example of this rhetorical questioning was in the South Carolina CNN/YouTube debate. The only



video submission picked by CNN (from thousands of citizen entries) whose question was directed to Gravel, was from a man named Don, who asked about Gravel's comments from a previous debate, in which Gravel had said that the soldiers in Vietnam died in vain. Don asked angrily how he (Gravel) expected to win in a country where this might offend people, following with a sly,

*Do you plan to defend the statement, or are you just going to flip-flop?*

It's more than obvious that this question was selected to enrage Gravel, and it worked, as he angrily responded,

*Yes they died in vain! Today you can go to Hanoi and get a Baskin Robin's ice cream.*

CNN knew that picking this video would elicit an angry (yet entertaining) response from Gravel, a passionate anti-war critic who had risked his career to keep more soldiers from, in his words, "dying in vain" in Vietnam. There was no real value in asking him this question, as he had clearly explained in a previous debate that he believed the soldiers of Vietnam had died in vain. For CNN, their video selection strategy worked, as the quick video clip of Gravel shouting angrily "*Yes they died in vain!*" found its way onto the following day's debate newscast. Although it should be pointed out that the media has tried to do this with most of the candidates, what is particular to Gravel's situation is that the *few* questions directed to him were almost *exclusively* focused on getting him to respond in a reactionary, angry way, useful only for post-debate shock-value reporting.

Aside from the questions designed to provoke controversy, or de-legitimize him as a “real” candidate, the rest of the questions given to Gravel in the debates ranged from the pointless, to the outright ridiculous. In the South Carolina MSNBC debate, he was asked to compare the U.S. and French nuclear systems, a question that lacked direct relevancy and voter interest. In the Manchester, NH CNN/WMUR debate, he was asked,

*Senator Gravel, if you are elected president, how, if at all, would you use former president Bill Clinton in your administration?*

This is a strange question for someone who has outwardly criticized the Clinton presidency. Anderson Cooper, in the CNN/YouTube debate, asked him bluntly,

*Senator Gravel, are you a liberal?*

Other than the Vietnam question discussed above, the only other questions in this debate given to Gravel were

*Who’s your favorite teacher and why?*

and

*Turn to the candidate to your left and say something nice about them.*

Perhaps the questions directed at Gravel were designed to make it seem like he was included (although he consistently received far fewer questions and much less response time than the rest of the candidates, save Dennis Kucinich). Gravel, responding to

audience applause when he complained of a lack of airtime, exclaimed,

*Thank you. Has it been fair thus far?*

The ABC debate in Des Moines, Iowa, was perhaps the most pointless debate for Gravel; he might as well not have even been there. The moderator, George Stephanopoulos, began the debate by stating the candidate's poll numbers. Getting to Mike Gravel, he said,

*And former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel, no support registered.*

He did not say that Mike Gravel (like other lesser-known candidates, such as Kucinich, Biden, or Dodd) is often not included in the polls (as other extremely low candidates - such as Kucinich, Biden, or Dodd), or that it was still half a year away from the primary elections. Instead he simply used the phrase "no support." After all the candidates laughed, he then said with a smirk,

*Not so bad, Senator Gravel. Maybe it'll go up after today.*

During the debate however, Stephanopoulos certainly seemed to do his best to keep that from happening. From my viewing of the debate and reviewing of the transcript, it is clear that Gravel was not asked a single serious question. Of the handful of questions Gravel was allowed to respond to, almost all of them were "all-candidate" questions including;

*Do you believe that, through the power of prayer, disasters like Hurricane Katrina or the Minnesota bridge collapse could've been prevented or lessened?*

or

*Name a major issue where you didn't tell the whole truth and describe what you left out?*

and

*What's the decisive moment of your life?*

In the other debates, Gravel was given at least one or two serious questions, usually on Iraq or Iran, but this time, he was there simply as a sideshow. Perhaps these were designed to throw a few minutes Gravel's way, to at least make it seem like he was included (although he consistently received far fewer questions and much less response time than the rest of the candidates save Dennis Kucinich).

Perhaps more important than the questions that *were* asked of Gravel, are the questions that *were not* asked of him. While he clearly received far fewer questions and much less speaking time than most of the other candidates, others like Dennis Kucinich also were consistently ignored. He wasn't the only candidate to be asked questions designed to provoke a controversial sound byte for the evening news, nor was he the only candidate to be asked ridiculous and silly questions. What is most conspicuous about Gravel's treatment by the mainstream press is that in all five major debates in which he was allowed to participate, Gravel was never asked specifically to explain the major platform of his campaign - the National Initiative for Democracy. Unlike most of the other candidates,

Gravel wanted to make a major structural change to the way our democracy functions. He spent the last decade designing and writing the initiative and organizing the foundation for its promotion (and in the process bankrupting himself). It seems only fair that he should have been asked about this project *at least once*. Here was a candidate with a wholly different approach to the political process. He deserved some time to present his ideas to the American people if for no other reason than for the sake of ideological diversity. It could not have been *that* hard to ask Gravel a question about his National Initiative for Democracy. A hypothetical question could have been:

*Moderator: My next question is for Senator Gravel. Congress's approval rating is near record low, as is the president's. There have been widespread cries about ethics reforms, successional "do-nothing congresses," and legislation gridlock. You've proposed implementing what you call the "National Initiative for Democracy," which you claim will place more power in the hands of citizens and help revitalize the democratic process. Please, explain to us what it is and why you support it so strongly.*

Any journalist with fifteen minutes to spare and a computer could figure out enough information about Gravel to come up with a question like this. A single trip to Gravel's website would give a curious journalist the sense that his National Initiative was the central piece of his campaign. If this hypothetical question, or a one like it, had been asked of him, just once, it would have allowed viewers to see what his campaign is all about, and would have, for the first time, given him a chance to be seen as something other than just an angry, anti-war hold-over from the Vietnam era.

## Rejection From (and During) The Debates

A hardly reported, yet quite revealing, slip happened at one of the less-viewed debates. It was one of those honest political moments which give a rare glimpse behind the nicely scripted stump speeches and well-groomed public personas of the candidates. It happened after the close of the NAACP debate in Detroit, Michigan. John Edwards and Hillary Clinton, still lounging around the podiums, were overheard - on stage, over microphones - talking about weeding out non-frontrunner candidates from participating in future debates (ABC Newsblog 2007).

Edwards (speaking in Hillary's ear): *At some point...maybe the fall, we should try to have a more serious and a more smaller group.*

Clinton: *Well we've got to cut the number because they are just, being trivialized.*

Edwards: *and they're, they're not serious.*

Clinton: *No...*

Clinton: *You know, I think there was an effort by our campaigns to do that... It got, somehow detoured.*

Clinton: *We've gotta get back to it because that's all we're going to do between now and then...* (Obama comes over to shake their hands)... *thanks Barack* (then Kucinich walks up from behind to congratulate them)

Clinton: *So... uh... thanks Dennis...* [TO EDWARDS]...*our guys should talk.*

The video clip (with transcription) is available on YouTube.com. This quick slip, barely caught on tape, reveals much about reality of contemporary politics. In this case, we

have two of the top three contenders, a full six months before the primary voting began (this debate was July 12<sup>th</sup>), candidly talking about how to get rid of “*non serious*” candidates and get a “*more serious, and a more smaller group.*” Anyone who has paid attention to the debates can figure out that they are referring to Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel - both of whom often make the “major” candidates look bad by poignantly criticizing their policies (especially on Iraq) as hypocritical. Most shocking is Hillary’s statement that she thought their campaigns (Edwards’s and her own) had *already* attempted to do that, but that it was “*somehow detoured.*” This is from two candidates whom are supposed rivals, especially as third-place John Edwards has made it a point of his campaign to blast Hillary as “politics-as-usual” and a “Washington insider.” As if their comments alone were not bad enough, right as they were talking about getting *rid* of “lower-tier candidates,” Dennis Kucinich - with a big, friendly smile - came over to shake their hands and congratulate them. As Hillary turned to acknowledge Kucinich with an awkward “*uh...thanks Dennis*” she turned back to Edwards and said “*our guys should talk.*” Maybe Hillary was just upset when Gravel pointed out that both Hillary and Edwards voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq in 2003, and went on to criticize Bill Clinton’s presidency for signing NAFTA into law. Ironically, this political faux pas comes right after a debate that focused in part on voting rights and the conduct of elections, and now it seems that the top candidates want to rig the very process.

As it turns out, Hillary and Edwards’s words turned out to be rather accurate in exemplifying the political and media mainstreams’ approach to such “marginal” candidates. From his appearance at the first debate and onwards, Gravel (and occasionally Kucinich) has fought a losing battle to stay in the debates. Beginning with the second debate to be held, the media

sponsors have repeatedly attempted to bar Gravel from being included. CNN and its local partners, WMUR-TV (owned by Hearst Corp.), and the New Hampshire newspaper, the Union Leader, originally excluded Gravel from participating in their debate - only the second debate to be held, on June 3<sup>rd</sup> (a mere ten months before the primaries began). When Gravel demanded to know why he “wasn’t invited,” they wrote:

*Because there are literally dozens and dozens of declared presidential candidates, most of whom we have never heard of, we have to have a method of determining who is invited. Our criteria simply identifies candidates that have measurable public support for their campaign. Because Mike Gravel has not demonstrated measurable public support for his campaign to date, he has not received an invitation. But we have not excluded him (or anyone) from the debate. If he meets our criteria between now and the debate, he will certainly get an invitation. (NH Insider 2007)*

It strikes me as disingenuous for the media sponsors to claim that Gravel hasn’t received “measurable public support” when the primary elections were ten months away. The whole point of the early debates are for the media to bring unfamiliar candidates to light, not to shut them out before the country has a chance to see them. Additionally, they did not mention what “method” they used to determine who got invited. While there are likely “dozens and dozens” of insignificant candidates running, the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) lists only eight Democratic candidates in their most recent filings report, the October Quarterly Presidential Report - the last of eight



being Mike Gravel (FEC 2007). Not only that, but as Gravel noted in his response to CNN/WMUR/Union Leader;

*That is true but out of those dozens of candidates, how many are former United States Senators who have been given the stamp of legitimacy by the Democratic National Committee, SEIU, AFSCME, ABC, the Nevada Democratic Party, the Center for American Progress Action Fund etc? Only two, former Senator John Edwards and myself.*

He went on to write;

*I am told I have not demonstrated measurable public support, which, besides being a galactic misunderstanding of polling numbers ten months before an election is also a self-fulfilling prophecy since being included in the debate would provide me and any other candidate who may have not been invited an important opportunity to secure such public support. (Gravel 2007)*

It was only through intense pressure from Gravel and his supporters that CNN and its New Hampshire partners agreed to over-turn their decision and allow Gravel to participate. Even though he was eventually allowed in, during the two hour long commercial-free debate, he was allowed only five minutes and thirty seven seconds total to answer the handful of questions directed his way (Gravel 2007).

Gravel's treatment brings up an interesting point about the media's role in "covering" primary elections. Just as the press explained to Larry Agran in 1992 that "he has not earned the right to media exposure because, among other things, he has not received enough media exposure (Meyrowitz 1992)," the

mainstream media attempted to bar Gravel because he had not received enough media attention or garnered “measurable” public support. This begs the question, how exactly could a candidate like Gravel - someone with the right credentials, a decade in the US Senate and personal experience ending an unpopular war - secure such public support and media attention? His biggest fault is not in his experience, but rather that he lacked the kind of financial abilities of his fellow candidates. It is the news media’s job to expose viable candidates and try to educate the public on their positions. At this point, ten months before the election, hardly anyone in the general population was even paying attention to primary politics, much less decided on which candidates to support. Barring a candidate before he or she ever receives a fair shot at public exposure seems more in-line with censorship than journalism for “the public good.”

When the mainstream media were unable to physically exclude him from the debates, they simply ignored him at the podium. In all the debates in which he was allowed to participate, it was obvious to any viewer that Gravel and often Kucinich received far less attention than the other more “mainstream” Democrats. In ABC’s debate in Des Moines, Iowa, Kucinich didn’t receive a question for over forty-five minutes. When moderator George Stephanopoulos finally allowed him to respond to a question about God and prayer, Kucinich answered:

*I’ve been standing here for the past 45 minutes praying to God you’re going to call on me. (Jackson 2007)*

Gravel faced even worse treatment than Kucinich. As even right wing media-watch group *NewsBusters.org* reported, the debate was “extremely unfair to both Kucinich and Mike Gravel”

(Gladnick 2007). Their statistical analysis of the debate helps show how. Here's their breakdown for the total amount of words spoken in the debate:

Candidate	Words	% of Total
Obama	2462	19.8
Clinton	2399	19.3
Edwards	1644	13.2
Biden	1415	11.4
Richardson	1319	10.6
Dodd	1230	9.9
Kucinich	1059	8.5
Gravel	896	7.2

(Gladnick 2007)

Even more revealing is the statistics on the first hour of the debate, which is considered to be the most important half, as many viewers switch off or 'tune out' by the second half.

Candidate	Words	% of Total
Hillary Clinton	1465	25.2
John Edwards	1093	18.8
Barack Obama	530	16.4
Joe Biden	758	13.0
Bill Richardson	680	11.7
Chris Dodd	548	9.4
Mike Gravel	325	5.6
Dennis Kucinich	204	3.4

(Gladnick 2007)

As one can see, Gravel received the least amount of attention overall, with just 7.2% of total words spoken compared with Obama's 19.8%. In the first half, Kucinich's

mere 3.4% and Gravel's 5.6% are glaringly short of Hillary's 25.2%, or over a quarter of all words spoken. What's most interesting is that Joe Biden, who often polls just as low as Chris Dodd and Mike Gravel, received far more attention than they, and even more than Bill Richardson, who consistently comes in fourth, behind Edwards. In the first half, Biden received twice as much attention as Kucinich, when in many polls Kucinich receives much more support than Biden. Perhaps this wide discrepancy has to do with the fact that Joe Biden is a long-time mainstream candidate while Dennis Kucinich has campaigned himself as an "alternative" choice to the Democratic mainstream. While this debate may have been particularly biased against the non-mainstream candidates - Gravel and Kucinich - this kind of treatment was much more the rule than the exception.

By the end of October, the mainstream media finally got what they wanted. After allowing him to participate in five major televised debates, NBC did not invite Mike Gravel to be a part of the next MSNBC debate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Gravel/Huffington Post 2007). When Gravel's staff called NBC directly to find out why he was barred from attending, Chuck Todd, NBC News's political director explained that Senator Gravel had not met any of the three criteria for inclusion - namely, that he hadn't campaigned in New Hampshire and/or Iowa at least fourteen times in the past year, that he was not polling at 5% and that he had not raised \$1 million. Neither Dodd, nor Kucinich, nor Biden had polled that high. Gravel claims to have been to New Hampshire more than 14 times (Gravel/Huffington Post 2007). Also, a then recent CNN poll had Gravel tied with Biden, Kucinich, and Dodd in terms of support (PollingReport 2007). The one criterion that Gravel could not match was, according to The Center For Responsible Politics money-tracking website, *opensecrets.org*,

that he had only raised \$238,745 (OpenSecrets 2008). It seems that NBC designed this criterion specifically to bar Gravel, as they could be sure that he had not even come close the one million dollar cut off. As a candidate that accepts no corporate, PAC, lobbyist, or any kind of "tainted" contribution, and as a candidate that began campaigning without any personal wealth to run on, the fact that he had raised over a quarter of a million dollars from individual donations is actually rather significant - especially in light of his lack of coverage in the mainstream press and being ignored in previous debates. Apparently NBC chose to use his lack of a personal fortune against him. Gravel's Communication director, Chris Petherick explained how it happened:

*The evolution was like this: Chuck Todd called us around five o'clock on Friday evening, which means they want to bury the story," Petherick said. "They laid out three requirements that no other organization or sponsor was required to have. They said we have to raise \$1 million by the third quarter, have 5 percent polling nationally, and visit Iowa or New Hampshire 14 times a year. He was rather vague, even in defining the criteria. (Takash 2008)*

It is worth noting that NBC did not contact Gravel's team until around five o'clock on a Friday evening, as Petherick noted, "*which means they want to bury the story.*" As many news analysts and critics have noted, leaking a story, giving details, or having a press conference on a Friday evening almost guarantees that the story will end up in Saturday morning's newspaper, when most commentators and major journalists are off for the weekend, and consumers are less interested in focusing on world events. It seems as that in this case, it was the

media itself attempting to avoid attention, as they certainly know the best time to release un-becoming news. NBC, having seen CNN and WMUR's first attempt to bar Gravel in New Hampshire, probably wanted to keep Gravel's exclusion under the media radar.

In a response to his exclusion, Gravel wrote:

*It is abundantly clear that NBC just wants me out of the race...The fact that NBC is owned by General Electric, one of the world's leading military contractors, is frightening and certainly smacks of censorship directed at the most outspoken critic of the influence that the military-industrial complex holds over this great nation. In the past decade, GE has benefited financially from the global war on terrorism and currently holds almost \$2 billion in military contracts.*

Gravel goes on to say:

*Unlike my fellow candidates, I am not focused on raising millions of dollars; I am focused on fixing representative government. (Gravel/Huffington 2007)*

Although Gravel's assertion about NBC's parent company General Electric's interest in silencing him over his anti-war views gets into the realm of speculation, GE does have a history of silencing anti-war critics through its media holdings. This was seen, for example, when they cancelled the Phil Donahue Show on the eve of the Iraq war, despite its position as the highest rated show on MSNBC, simply because Phil Donahue was the lone mainstream news show which still allowed anti-war voices on (FAIR 2003). As a leaked internal NBC memo explained, the Donahue show presented a "difficult

public face for NBC in a time of war,” going on to say that the show could become “a home for the liberal anti-war agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity” (FAIR 2003).

In any case, whether Gravel was barred because of his virulent anti-war statements, or because he was not wealthy enough, once NBC succeeded in barring him, it stuck. Taking their cue from NBC, as the mainstream press often does from each other, Gravel has been barred from every televised debate since. The next debate, held by CNN in Las Vegas, followed suit, barring Gravel because of his “lackluster fundraising,” according to CNN vice president David Borhman (Ball 2007). It’s unfortunate, especially since this debate blew away the others in terms of viewership, with a record 4.04 million viewers (Multichannel News 2007). Having established Gravel as a non-candidate, it was highly unlikely that the mainstream media would allow him to participate in future debates.

One interesting note however, is that a little less than a month after the CNN Las Vegas debate, National Public Radio held a “radio-only” Democratic Debate on December 4<sup>th</sup>, which allowed all eight candidates (including Gravel) to participate. With no cheering audiences and no commercials, the program went smoothly and all candidates got to speak candidly about their positions and differences (perhaps there is something about the medium of radio which brings a more civil, intimate style). Although Gravel received the least amount of time to speak, he still received five or six periods of time where he was allowed to answer at length and without interruption. Essentially, it was the first time Gravel had been treated as any kind of an equal with the other candidates. It must have been a bit awkward for the “major” candidates, as Gravel hadn’t been allowed to debate with them since September 26<sup>th</sup> at the Dartmouth College debate in New Hampshire. His exclusion

from the previous two debates was not mentioned, and everyone carried on as normal for what was, in this author's opinion, the most informative and least combative debate yet held.

As it turns out, Edwards and Hillary finally got their wish. In the most recent debate (as of this writing), held in Johnston, Iowa, by Iowa Public Television and the Des Moines Register, not only was Gravel barred, again, since by this time it had become the accepted industry standard that "he was out," but even Dennis Kucinich, who has a fiercely loyal support base, was barred. The media's reasoning was that neither candidate had rented office space and neither candidate had a full-time paid campaign member in the state (Marre 2007). So, for the first time this primary season, a Democratic debate was held with only "mainstream" candidates, all of whom claim to be "different" from each other, yet none of whom bring the kind of honest rhetoric and policy criticism which Kucinich and Gravel brought; which is quite important for healthy deliberation (and an informed citizenry). While Gravel had not garnered significant poll numbers by this point in the race, Kucinich often polled higher than some of the mainstream candidates. According to the most recent CNN/WMUR New Hampshire Primary Poll (done by the UNH Survey Center), Kucinich polled at 3%, compared to Dodd and Biden, both at just 1% (Smith 2007). Why were Dodd and Biden included then? Likely it was because they have enough personal wealth and big-money contributions to have *paid* employees in Iowa.

With the exclusion of Kucinich and Gravel, the most progressive candidates running for the Democratic ticket, many progressives and others became alarmed at what seemed to be a worrisome attempt by either the Democratic Party, top-tier candidates, the mainstream press, or likely, a combination of all three, to try to rid the debates of embarrassing criticism from the progressive left. In response to The Des Moines Register's



rejection of the two candidates, a concerned citizen wrote to the newspaper:

*By denying the opportunity to speak to Kucinich and Gravel, you disenfranchise the two candidates' supporters across the country, sharply curtail the range of views and ideas available to all U.S. voters in the national TV audience, truncate the debate of ideas, skew the debate to the right, betray fundamental democratic principles, and deny the right to equal access by candidates to the public's airwaves. (Ireland 2007)*

In the first Republican presidential debate, there were ten Republican candidates (as opposed to the Democrats' eight), and today the debate organizers continue to allow around nine candidates to participate in their many presidential debates. In fact, in the same debate held in Iowa by The Des Moines Register but for the Republican ticket, Alan Keyes, arguably more "marginal" than Gravel and certainly far less popular than Kucinich, was allowed to join. This comes on top of Keyes's late entry into the race. Could it be that Republicans are more progressive in their inclusion of divisive and criticizing voices (as Alan Keyes certainly likes to criticize the mainstream Republican candidates)? Or rather, is the so-called "liberal" mainstream press simply more friendly to the right, allowing all Republican voices - from Libertarian-leaning Ron Paul to ultra-right-winger Keyes to xenophobe Tom Tancredo - while trying its hardest to exclude liberal and left-wing candidates from the Democratic race.

Barring Kucinich and Gravel because they lacked the financial resources to pay full-time employees seems contrary to fair democracy. Unfortunately, much of this behind-the-scenes deal making is, well, behind the scenes. That is, except

for when we see a slip like Edwards and Hillary's caught-on-camera chat. The general public does not give much input, if any at all, into who gets included, who gets rejected, and why. As Gravel's final blow came because of his lack of finances, one certainly needs to assess the health of the process. This begs the question, who in America gets to run for president? Well, anyone *can* run, but the odds are certainly stacked against you if you are not a millionaire - and apparently, if you are a progressive Democrat.

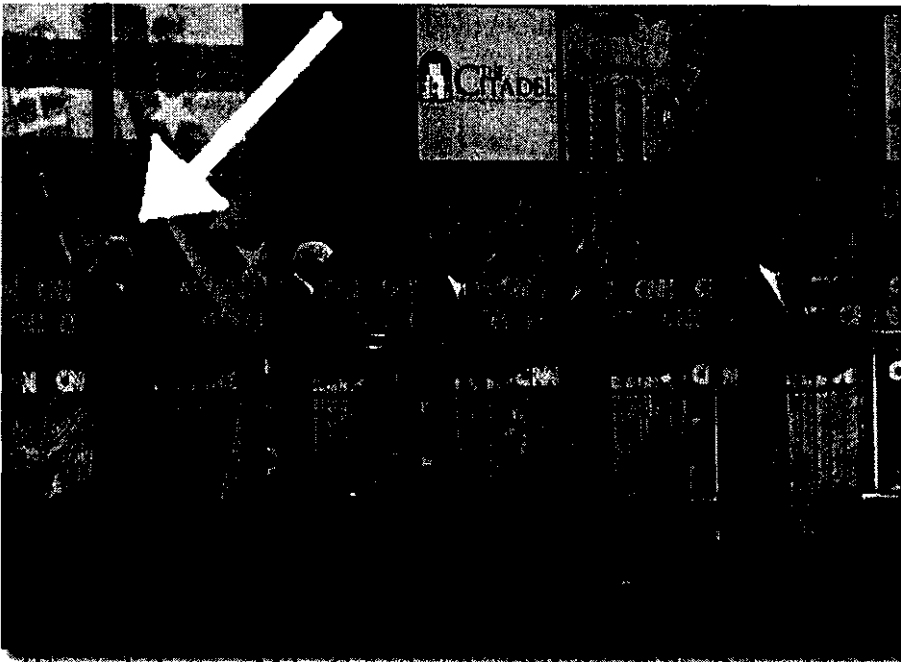
### Set Up For Failure

As if rhetorical and physical rejection was not enough, the media sponsors who organized the debates - those which Senator Gravel was allowed to participate in - attempted to *symbolically* marginalize Gravel as well. Having watched all of the major debates so far, I noticed that Gravel (and often Kucinich) always seemed to be placed on the far ends of the podium lineup. Curious, I scoured Google for photos of each major debate. I found that in four out of the five major televised debates that included Gravel, he was placed at either the extreme right or left end. That is 80% of the time that he was placed at either end of the line up.

1. April 26, 2007 - Orangeburg, South Carolina. NBC News  
- Gravel was the last person on the right end
2. June 3, 2007 - Manchester, New Hampshire. CNN/WMUR-TV/Union Leader  
- Gravel was all the way to the right, last one on the end.
3. July 23, 2007 - Charleston, South Carolina. CNN/YouTube  
(see image) - Gravel was the last candidate on the end, left side.
4. August 19, 2007 - Des Moines, Iowa. ABC News

- Gravel was placed in the center, the only time not on either end.

5. September 26, 2007 - Hanover, New Hampshire. MSNBC NBC News- Gravel was again, placed on the far end, right side.



[Example Image: Mike Gravel at the CNN/YouTube Debate]

Not only did the mainstream media tell him that he was a non-serious, marginal candidate, but they physically marginalized him from the other “real” candidates. It is as if they were symbolically saying that, Gravel, the “fringe candidate”, belongs on the fringe, literally. Note the line up of the CNN/YouTube debate pictured above. Gravel is placed on the far left end, and Kucinich (although cut out of the photo) on the far right end. As you move towards the center, the more

popular candidates emerge, until you reach the center with Edwards, Hillary, and Obama clustered together. Debate line-up has often been a contentious issue, with some candidates' campaigns complaining that the media placed candidate X beside candidate Y in order to create a verbal fight or an awkward situation. The mainstream news media claims to randomly assign placement for "fairness", insisting that stage positioning is essentially the luck of the draw. Therefore, Gravel is either extremely unlucky, or the media sponsors deliberately placed him on the end.

### **News Media Coverage: The "For Entertainment" Candidate**

In the formal, "objective" environment of presidential debates, Mike Gravel was ignored, laughed at, and played off as unimportant. His treatment in regular news coverage however, particularly in the daily twenty-four hour cable news grind, was far worse. Although he generally received little media exposure, when journalists did report on him, or his campaign, they centered on Gravel's value as a "for-entertainment" candidate. Perhaps they were right, given that in the debates he was fed questions designed to provoke an angry response or biting critique of the major candidates. His inclusion in the debates seemed designed as an entertainment piece, so the evening news could have an exciting video clip to play at the end of the night. CNN's Jackie Schechner noted that, although a lot of people thought the first Democratic debate was "*god-awful boring*," Mike Gravel was the "*highlight with all of his sort of antics*" (CNN April 27<sup>th</sup>). Glen Beck, on CNN's Headline News, put it bluntly while showing a clip of Gravel's responses:

*If you missed the first Democratic primary debate last week, you missed some real entertainment, and I'm not*

*kidding. Former Democratic senator and presidential hopeful Mike Gravel. (CNN Headline News May 1<sup>st</sup>)*

On Fox News, linguist and major wordsmith for the Republican Party, Frank Luntz, quipped:

*Mike Gravel is obviously the humorous interjection in these debates, but I have to tell you that by the time it is done, people don't want to hear from him, they want to hear serious policy, serious philosophy, and they want to know what is going to happen. (FOX News July 24<sup>th</sup>)*

Fox News's Charles Krauthammer, laughingly argued for Gravel's inclusion in the debate:

*But he should be admitted entirely on his entertainment value. This is a man who has a capacity to work himself into a froth of righteous indignation that is indescribable, in under 20 seconds. (FOX News December 12<sup>th</sup>)*

And it's not just the 24-hour cable news channels; network news anchors followed suit. ABC's George Stephanopoulos, had this to say about ABC's debate:

*Well setting aside Mike Gravel who provided the comic relief everyone else seemed credible, seemed intelligent, seemed like they knew what they were talking about. (ABC News April 29<sup>th</sup>)*

NBC's Tim Russert, put forth a similar opinion:

*And I think Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel played their roles. I mean, Mike Gravel was there to tip over chairs and be the uncle who came down from the attic.* (NBC News April 27<sup>th</sup>)

What is remarkable here is that both Russert and Stephanopoulos were debate moderators in their respective debates for NBC and ABC. This is how the supposedly “objective” moderators portray Gravel’s candidacy, journalists whom are supposed to be fair with the candidates and help the public learn their policies.

### **The “Angry Uncle” of the Democratic Party**

Russert’s depiction of Gravel as the wild “*uncle who came down from the attic*” was a favorite characterization of Gravel in the mainstream press. CNN’s reporters and commentators certainly seemed to push this image. CNN’s Carol Costello, in post-debate coverage said:

*Mike Gravel, he just sounded angry. He looked kind of like your kooky uncle at Thanksgiving...he was angry about everything it seemed.* (CNN July 23<sup>rd</sup>)

Democratic analyst for CNN, Donna Brazile, echoed such a characterization:

*But you know, let me just tell you, we all have crazy uncles and Mike Gravel was, in my judgment.* (CNN April 27<sup>th</sup>)

ABC’s guest commentator, Nick Kroll, carried it even further, exclaiming:

*Turns out, Senator Gravel is the crazy uncle who ruins Thanksgiving.* (ABC News April 27<sup>th</sup>)

Mike Gravel as the “crazy uncle” became common in the little time the press spent talking about his candidacy. Such characterization spread among journalists, both national and local, and became almost standard. Top New Hampshire newspaper, The Union Leader, viscosly editorialized that,

*It's time to send the mad uncle of the Democratic Party back to the attic, where he came from.* (Union Leader 2007)

Apart from calling him the “Mad Uncle” of the Democratic Party or dismissing him as simply debate entertainment, the talking heads on cable news used a plethora of negative and condescending characterizations to describe Gravel. CNN contributed much of the commentary on Senator Gravel. Jeanne Moos, of CNN, said that Gravel had been “*more zany than Zen*” during the debates (CNN June 18<sup>th</sup>). The usually demure John Roberts had this to say:

*I think that Gravel is going to do well because he's sort of almost like a child – even though he's not exactly a child anymore but he's sort of a product of the YouTube situation.* (CNN July 23<sup>rd</sup>)

Glen Beck, the angry, wanna-be-Bill O'Reilly of CNN's “CNN Headline News”, made Gravel a favorite target of his commentary, calling him a “*ninth-tier*” candidate and saying that,

*Mike Gravel is clearly the mayor of Crazytown USA.*  
(CNN Headline News June 22<sup>nd</sup>)

Not to be outdone by rival network CNN, MSNBC also took its fair share of cracks against Gravel. David Schuster remarked:

*Is Democrat Mike Gravel running for president of the United States or weirdo of the year?* (MSNBC June 18<sup>th</sup>)

Hillary Rosen joked at both “alternative” Democratic candidates, asking,

*How is Kucinich going to get any attention, if Mike Gravel goes crazy in this campaign?* (MSNBC April 27<sup>th</sup>)

Tucker Carlson, the bowtied conservative pundit, put it plainly,

*I would say Mike Gravel, as much as I love him, I think he probably is deranged.* (MSNBC October 26<sup>th</sup>)

Aside from the name calling done by the mainstream press, the most troubling and perhaps disingenuous aspect to Gravel’s coverage in the mainstream press was what was not reported. Just as with the debates, Senator Gravel was never allowed to present his platform for legislation reform, or to make a serious case for his National Initiative. The only time I saw Gravel given any kind of a chance to explain the National Initiative was on Fox News’s “Hannity and Colmes” show (FOX News April 17<sup>th</sup>). Alan Colmes allowed Gravel to explain how his National Initiative would work, using referendum voting for pressing national issues. While this seems admirable at first, it quickly became clear that the only reason they



allowed him on was to get a laugh and to portray him as a “far-left” loony. Sean Hannity, the “conservative” (with Alan Colmes as the “liberal”) completely ignored all of what Gravel was saying, and repeatedly pressed Gravel on whether or not he supported the idea a “world government.” Hannity continued to interrupt Gravel to push his speculation that Gravel supported a “world government”, even though Gravel repeatedly denied this and had never mentioned anything like it as part of his campaign. At first, Gravel seemed perplexed at Hannity’s insistence, and then he became angry as he realized that Hannity just wanted to portray him as a crazy left-winger with a conspiracy for world statism. For Fox News, Gravel presented the conservative-leaning network a chance to show it’s viewers one of those “crazies” on the left who supported a kind of “new world order” conspiracy – despite such notions having nothing to do with any of Gravel’s actual policies.

Amidst the constant demeaning coverage of Gravel, one positive narrative did occasionally emerge. Although commentators and journalists enjoyed making fun of his candidacy, some found his inclusion in the debates to be both refreshing and badly needed. A few journalists, after the joking died down, pointed out how Gravel’s style and rhetoric was a welcome respite from the well-polished and well-scripted rhetoric of the major candidates. CNN correspondent Tom Foreman noted:

*You know, the best way to know who this guy is to talk who he’s not. Everybody knows that all these political debates are all so coached and prepared. And the big candidates are all set on exactly what they are going to say. Last night, three syllables changed all of that; Mike Gravel. (CNN April 27<sup>th</sup>)*

Some journalists also commented on how valuable it was to have the badly-needed criticism of the “major candidates” from Mike Gravel and Dennis Kucinich. CNN’s Anderson Cooper pointed out how:

*Certainly some of the harshest criticism came from former Senator Mike Gravel as well as Congressman Dennis Kucinich, basically at one point blaming the Democrats, as well as the Bush administration for this war. (CNN June 3<sup>rd</sup>)*

Instead of following the journalistic mantra summed up by the Fox News motto, “We report. You decide,” it seems that the mainstream media are instead making it easier for the electorate, much easier. When it comes to Gravel, they have not only reported, but have also decided. They are making the decisions on which candidates are viable and worthy of votes. In their words, Mike Gravel is not a serious candidate, instead, he is a piece of entertainment, a crazy uncle who came “down from the attic” to rustle the feathers of the major candidates and then be ignored, but not until everyone has had a good laugh. Despite the occasional admittance that Gravel’s criticism helps flesh-out hypocrisy or rhetorical spin from the major candidates, he still does not count as legitimate.

### **Gravel’s Response**

As mentioned earlier, Larry Agran, facing exclusion from the 1992 debates and being ignored by the mainstream press, had to use protests and disruptions to try to gain media attention. As Meyrowitz explains, “He [Agran] has found that to become visible, he has to be disruptive (Meyrowitz 1992).” At one debate in Nashua, New Hampshire, on health care, from which he had been barred, Agran stood up in the crowd and

demanding to know why they excluded him. Responding to a signal from state party officials, security personnel began to remove Agran, but the crowd's shouts of "Freedom of speech!" and "Let us vote!" embarrassed the sponsors into inviting him onstage to join the debate. The confrontation was Agran's first widely reported "campaign event" - although his innovative proposals for health care reform went completely unmentioned.

Facing similar rejection from the press, Gravel has responded in a like manner. Aside from demanding to know why he had been barred from the debates, Gravel has responded to his exclusion through a variety of alternative and creative ways. From the beginning of his campaign, without the money needed for a traditional primary run, Gravel took to the (cheaper) possibilities of the Internet to get attention and create a campaign. Using the rapid information spreading and sharing abilities of such tools as YouTube.com, Gravel was able to capture media attention early on through his use of creative, often strange campaign videos. One such video, the aptly titled "Mike Gravel - Rock" gained widespread national media coverage (YouTube; bilinsi 2007). This, now-famous video, is of Mike Gravel at a park, staring solemnly at the camera, framed in a close-up shot. He just stands there, quietly, as birds chirp, staring at the camera (and you) for an awkwardly long minute and eleven seconds. Then, without saying a word, he turns and walks slowly away, picks up a medium sized rock and throws it into a pond. As the ripples from the splash spread larger and larger, he, still without saying a word, walks away, off into the distance, as "gravel2008.us" fades onto the screen. The video lasts for three minutes, and certainly leaves the viewer to interpret what they just saw however they would like.

"Mike Gravel - Rock" spread rapidly online, as have other "viral" YouTube videos. Other videos of his have achieved similar acclaim, one of him burning sticks, another of

him rapping about censorship, and his most recent “Two Mikes” in which he debates himself in a split screen. To be fair, he is not the only candidate using strange or humorous videos to get attention, Mike Huckabee ran an ad with martial arts star (and college student fascination), Chuck Norris, proclaiming that he would use Chuck Norris to “secure our border” and stating that he was “Chuck Norris approved” (YouTube; Veracifier 2007).

Art history professor, Crispin Sartwell, wrote about “Mike Gravel - Rock” in the *Los Angeles Times* (with a dose of sarcasm perhaps), comparing Gravel’s work with that of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, calling him a “genius” and the “avant garde of the new art-political era” (Sartwell 2007). He interpreted Gravel’s silence as “infinitely more expressive than the words of Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama” (2007). Sartwell believes that it is a statement about how, in American politics, “language has been so emptied of meaning that silence is the only remaining medium of expression” (2007). By throwing the rock into the pond, Gravel means to symbolize the spark of the movement, which will ripple across the political landscape of America.

Perhaps Sartwell’s analysis is a bit far-fetched; however Gravel admits that he was trying to show how his message and campaign would “ripple” out. From one perspective, it worked. All the major news networks and cable news channels reported on his bizarre piece of political advertising. Through its combined view count on YouTube.com (there are two separate videos with the same footage), his “Rock” video approached one million views (380,389 for one, and 354, 917 for the other), and has reached millions more by being replayed and reported on in the mainstream press. For a campaign with very little funds, Gravel’s use of YouTube.com and other Internet video

sharing sites as a medium to spread these types of campaign ads is novel, to say the least.

Although exposure of his YouTube creation may have rippled out into the mainstream press, one can hardly say such exposure was flattering. The reports went to the tune of, "Hey remember that angry guy at the first debate? Yeah, the one from Alaska, well check out this kooky YouTube video he put out." In the news reports there were no explanations of Gravel's attempt to start a "ripple" through mainstream politics, or of brash platform to reform the legislative process, instead, commentators used it as an end-of-the-hour laugh. Like Larry Agran's 1992 debate incident, the press focused on the scuffle with security guards, not on Agran's performance in the debate or campaign. Ultimately, this kind of disruptive approach may be negative, as it only reinforced Gravel's (and Agran's) status as a frivolous candidate. These candidates are used and framed by the mainstream media as solely entertainment and oddities. They become a news piece only to break the monotony and dullness of "regular" campaign coverage - not to expose a candidate with a legitimate or alternative platform.

### **Alternative Debating**

In response to being successfully barred from the MSNBC debate in Philadelphia, Mike Gravel announced that he would run an "alternative debate," streamed online, at World Cafe Live, a location across the street from the "real" debate. He was doing this both as a protest to being excluded, and so that he could continue to "participate." Gravel streamed his "alternative debate" live, answering the questions posed to the candidates, and commenting on their answers. "The hope is just to democratize the entire debate process because it's controlled by the corporate media," Gravel Communications Director David Eisenbeck said (Takash 2007). One of the first issues

discussed in the televised debate was the issue of Iran and what strategies the candidates had to engage in diplomacy. "Mike was already pointing out how Hillary was wrong on a lot of issues... Iran specifically," Eisenbeck said (Takash 2007). Eisenbeck maintained that "Gravel is needed in the Democratic debates, because without him, there's no challenge to the issue" (Takash 2007). This "alternative debate" allowed the small audience to listen to his response, as well as enabled many more viewers online to see him "participate." One of the protestors in the audience at World Café Live expressed his concern over Gravel's disbarment; "The Founding Fathers didn't say that we weren't going to have a revolution because we don't have enough money" (Mulay 2007).

For the following debate, held in Las Vegas by CNN, from which Gravel was also excluded, he again ran an "alternative debate." Held in Las Vegas, at the Paris Hotel and Casino, and streamed live at [www.UStream.tv](http://www.UStream.tv), Gravel again answered many of the candidates' questions and commented on their answers. Using TIVO this time, Gravel was able to "pause live TV" and comment even more at length. One particularly memorable moment, a clip which has received over 50,000 hits on YouTube, was Gravel's response to Hillary's stance on Iran. He paused her mid-speech and argued at length that when she, as well as most of those in the Senate, voted to label Iran's Revolutionary Guard a "terrorist organization", it was not only illegal and unprecedented, but a stepping-stone to war with Iran. As he stated in his infamous anti-establishment rhetoric, "Hillary your lips are moving and you're lying" (YouTube; gravel2008 2007).

Gravel's use of viral YouTube videos and alternative debates presents an interesting case study of how candidates, "rejected" from the political mainstream and corporate media, can still attempt to break back into the public conscious. It

remains to be seen if Gravel will be successful, although it does not look too promising, at least for winning the Democrats' ticket. His "anti-system" campaign gives hope for a more democratic future, as it challenges the traditional system of the two-party establishment and corporate media control. For Larry Agran - aside from a few angry letters to the editor, and a very-interesting academic op-ed piece by Joshua Meyrowitz - once he was rejected, it was a complete media blackout. One can imagine that in the future, it will not be as easy for the press to control the ebb and flow of political worthiness, and hopefully, with burgeoning new communications technology and alternative media outlets, such undemocratic practices will be, at the very least, more difficult to carry out.

### **In the End**

As a candidate, Gravel began with the odds stacked against him. He had been out of national politics for almost three decades. He had no personal wealth, and because he was running on a strongly anti-war and anti-corporate insider platform, he was not likely to gain any big money donations from industry or business. Nor did he have the support, as he did during his vice-presidential run in the 1970's, of the mainstream Democratic Party or congressional colleagues. Additionally, as a visibly "older" candidate in his seventies, he lacked the more youthful and graceful political imagery of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, his time as a maverick U.S. Senator, his no-compromise approach to ending unpopular war policies, and his strong stance against government secrecy and "Washington insiders", all fit well with the mood of many in today's political landscape. His treatment by the media however, far more than any of his detractions, clearly kept any potential supporters from being able to judge him as a serious candidate with a legitimate platform. From the first debate and

onwards, when not ignored far at the end of the line up, he was asked pointed questions aimed to get him into one of his “angry old man” reactions with one of the major candidates. The only serious questions in which Gravel was included centered on the Iraq war and Iran, both issues to which Gravel takes a strongly antagonistic stance on the mainstream Democrats’ policies. He was never asked a single question about the central focus of his campaign - his National Initiative for Democracy.

Gravel was used primarily as an entertainment piece for comic relief in the early debates. As things became more serious, the mainstream press decided he had to go. While their first attempt failed, their shifting criteria, seemingly designed to exclude him, succeeded by the sixth major debate - which just happened to be the most watched debate in history. All this while the Republican debates have continued to include more candidates and a far greater diversity of opinions and ideas. “Alternative” Republican candidate, Ron Paul, who like Gravel wants a major overhaul in Washington, has been allowed to remain in the debates. Perhaps because Senator Gravel made the “major” candidates look bad, or because he challenged the official line of the Democratic Party and Democratically-led congress, or because his message conflicted with the political economy and interests of the media conglomerates running the debates, Gravel was rejected before most people in America were even paying attention. His response, utilizing alternative media and internet buzz is unique, but could not bring him before the general public in any significant way. His response perhaps ultimately contributed to his portrayal as a non-serious, “fringe” candidate.

Interestingly, many media commentators, when joking about “crazy Gravel” or musing over his YouTube creations, seemed to include how he added “diversity in opinion” and a “badly needed voice of criticism” to the debates. With the



“major” candidates making rhetorically careful statements and issue-dodging generalities, Gravel was a welcome burst of honesty and integrity to many. Even if the news media never gave him a real chance as a candidate, just having him there brought the debates and the primary election a badly needed critical voice - one that certainly represents the concerns of many people around the country. Just as the 1992 Democratic race lost a valuable voice with Larry Agran’s rejection, so too have the Democrats in the 2008 race. At a time of war, when concern over government and political transparency is at a new height, and when the public has lost much of its confidence in government, rejecting Mike Gravel has only weakened the democratic process.

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The author wishes to thank professor James Farrell, professor Joshua Meyrowitz, and Hannah Lally for their thoughtful comments, beneficial criticisms, and generous help.

## **Systemic Blindness and Disease Mongering: A Social Constructionist Investigation**

**Kirstyn Peterson**

In our fast-paced and often critical society, we're all constantly faced with insecurities, guilt, and confusion regarding what our culture expects of us. The individualist discourse that is overwhelmingly present around us stresses the importance of maintaining control in all circumstances and we seem to be constantly comparing ourselves to some unattainable ideal. In order to be included and, above all, respected, it is crucial that one adheres to the widely held beliefs of what is socially acceptable. However, these expectations are not always easily defined and therefore lead to the collective depression of a society who repeatedly feels that they are not up to par.

When this occurs, we immediately assume that there is something innately wrong with us. We have a common belief in our culture that we are self-contained individuals who are solely responsible for our own actions. This steady feeling of liability relates to a systemic blindness, a term introduced by Kenneth Gergen. It explains the common cultural assumption that "individuals cause problems and individuals must be repaired – through therapy, education, imprisonment and so on" (Gergen). We consider the characteristics that our community has determined to be negative, such as peculiarity, unattractiveness, disease and criminal behavior, to be unappealing and therefore we avoid association with these traits due to the fear of being labeled by society. We rarely stop to

consider that the problem might actually lie within the social frameworks, dialogues, and institutions that surround us.

Think for a second of all you must accomplish for others to view you as someone with good hygiene. We must shower daily, clean our hair with shampoo products, brush our teeth, and apply deodorant or perfume products. Most of these habits have become standard practice for us, but we seldom take a critical stance and ponder, why? What do these “typical” practices tell us about what our society values, and above all, deems mandatory? Take deodorant for example. Deodorant is a well-known and widely used item you could probably find in every home. If you refuse to wear your deodorant for a week, you must be prepared to suffer the possible social consequences of an acquaintance who doesn’t agree with your natural scent. It is remarkable to think of where these customs derived from in the first place. Who was the individual who decided that humans smell and, therefore, must cover up their odor with powder fresh deodorant? Some argue that it is we as a culture who have deciphered these hygienic standards. Others have begun to question our social institutions’ role in helping to persuade us.

As social constructionists, we do not wish to play the blame game. In terms of our embedded customs it is clearly a joint effort between individual and society. In this essay, I do not aim not to prove a point, but rather to explore the multiple possibilities available to us for explaining our current circumstances. As I mentioned earlier, systemic blindness leads us to “fail to explore the broader circumstances in which actions are enmeshed, and focus all too intensely on the single body before our eyes” (Gergen). We must begin to reflect upon alternative ways of acting in order to gain a greater understanding of our world.

Let's begin to take a different approach. Consider first the amount of people in our world that take a daily prescription medication, multi-vitamin, or pill with the intent to make them "better", "healthier", and "stronger" individuals. Americans rarely second-guess a doctor's advice to take a prescription because his word is accepted as truth in our cultural context. However, recently, people have been speculating about the intentions of the American healthcare industry. Nowadays it seems that there are so many "new" diseases and possibly problematic conditions that some individuals have begun to hesitate in so readily accepting their doctor's word as the ultimate truth. This critical stance towards medication has been controversially named, "drug mongering." Drug mongering has recently been discussed substantially within the medical profession.

Drug mongering is defined as a "perceived attempt by pharmaceutical companies to promote public awareness of relatively minor conditions or diseases with the aim of increasing sales of medication." Going along with the assumption that we are byproducts of our interactions and relations with others and are therefore driven to adopt cultural narratives, this theory suggests that in our profit driven community we are essentially being sold sickness. Journalist Ray Moynihan and pharmacology professor David Henry state that, "It can also be argued that disease mongering is the opportunistic exploitation of both a widespread anxiety about frailty and a faith in scientific advance and "innovation"—a powerful economic, scientific, and social norm". Here we can begin to see that the common assumption that science is irrefutable fact might be a possible barrier for citizens to overcome before they can view this comparison with an unbiased lens. Along with medical professionals, we commonly place the opinions of science and technology professionals upon



a pedestal of accuracy. One must try to refrain from these suppositions in order to truly step outside of individualism's rigid constraints.

Take, for example, recently labeled "conditions" such as male pattern baldness, erectile dysfunction disorder, and social anxiety. These conditions prey on and perpetuate common social phobias and encourage the establishment of social norms. The message is clear: if a man is not able to become "sufficiently" aroused with his partner, he needs to buy and take a prescription medication to give him the ability to achieve an erection. By touting erectile dysfunction medications, drug companies are implying that there is something inherently "wrong" with anyone that cannot perform sexually. Likewise, as in the example of deodorant, social discourse about body odor has advanced so far that there are now multiple brands of "prescription" strength sweat protection available. However, sweating, the loss of hair, and so on are all natural processes. How is it that we have come to define a natural progression as a dilemma to be solved? Let us think also of conditions such as restless leg syndrome and seasonal depression. These "diseases" should be more closely associated with common feelings and sensations that most individuals experience from time to time. There may be instances when one experiences sadness, or anxiety. These once natural occurrences are now being deemed problematic. Research partners Steven Woloshin and Lisa Schwartz claim, "For some people, symptoms are severe enough to be disabling. But for many others with milder problems, these "symptoms" are just the transient experiences of everyday life".

In conclusion, I am not attempting to declare any truths in the theory of disease mongering, but rather to help others begin to think more critically about excessive diagnoses meant to find something wrong with us. This piece means to mentally

stimulate readers to take a closer look at the medical phenomena around us, and consider all perspectives equally, not just the 'professional' or expert discourse. Before you accept a social diagnosis, I ask you to stop and consider that "helping sick people get treatment is a good thing. Convincing healthy people that they are sick is not".

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# **Fighting For Our Hearts and Minds: Manipulation, Media Coverage, and Military Control From the Gulf War to Iraq**

**Katrina Ingraham**

## **Abstract**

Public relations techniques and propaganda were essential in the both the Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War. Tactics of deception and the media's willingness to assist in pro-war news coverage enabled the current Bush administration to successfully carry out its political agenda without much hesitation from its government or its people. With new military departments established for the specific purpose of media management, as well as hiring professional public relations and marketing firms, the American public was duped with showy press briefings and staged events. The U.S. military controlled the media by the 'pool' system during the Gulf War, but turned to 'embedding' journalists during the Iraq War with hopes they would lose their objectivity. This effective strategy worked and although it brought the American audience closer to the battlefield than in any other war, it gave a very one-sided view of the 'war on terror'.

## **Introduction**

During the Vietnam War, the United States military learned the hard lesson of the importance of the media in 'winning a war.' Sections of the military elite have come to

believe that it was the media's coverage that led to the United States defeat in Vietnam (Kumar 2006). Without the support of the people and the winning of their 'hearts and minds,' it is very difficult for a country to 'win' a war. Media control and propaganda, in turn, must become a main military objective, especially in our fast paced, media saturated world.

After the events of September 11, 2001, the American public was struck with a wave of fear made no less intense by George W. Bush's 'war drums' rhetoric coupled with fanatic patriotism and the demonization of figures in the Middle East in the media. Only after a few months of attacks did Bush wage his "War on Terror." The first target was Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden was allegedly hiding in his headquarters, sheltered under the protection of the Taliban. What came next confirms just how well planned propaganda schemes (also known as public relations) can manipulate a public and a government to acquiesce an administration's agenda. In this case, the task was to link Saddam Hussein and Iraq with September 11. The fictitious PR campaign that followed was so thorough that not only did half the American people think that Iraq had something to do with the 9/11 attacks, but they also believed that at least one of the hijackers was Iraqi, when in fact neither is true (Kumar 2006).

This level of manipulation takes careful planning and a tight leash on all those involved. It also takes strict adherence to scripts consisting of vague and confusing rhetoric. This kind of discourse is outlined in George Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language." In his essay, Orwell states,

This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the

abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like sections of a prefabricated hen-house. (Orwell 1946: 145)

The Bush Administration has become very good at producing confusing discourse and avoiding hard questions from journalists. They have also become skilled at fabricating stories and ignoring the truth. Case in point is the Bush Administration's assertion that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein had been hiding a strong nuclear weapon's program. In true Orwellian fashion, George W. Bush and others in his administration repeated terms and themes so often in their speeches that the public began to believe it as truth.

### **Propaganda and Media Coverage from the Gulf to Iraq**

Both the Iraq and Gulf wars were started on the basis of a fabricated story. Most recently in the Iraq war, it was Saddam's supposed caches of weapons of mass destruction and the threat of a nuclear attack; during the Gulf War it was the fake atrocity known as the baby incubator story (SBS 2003). "Of all the accusations against [Saddam Hussein], none had more impact on the American public than the one about Iraqi soldiers removing 312 babies from their incubators and leaving them to die on the cold hospital floors of Kuwait City" (MacArthur 2004). It is unclear where this story originated, but several 'witnesses' came forward to tell what they had seen, all of whom would not give their last name, making their testimony questionable at best (MacArthur 2004). Yet this was enough to send America to war.

During the war in the Gulf, the U.S. military was careful in how they dealt with journalists and what stories they were allowed to publish. They invented what was known as the 'pool system,' where only a certain number of journalists were allowed to report at the battle lines at one time. Those journalists reported back to their base, where they shared their information with the 'pool'. Journalists found this system to be very frustrating at times, and because the system was so competitive, journalists often wrote only stories they knew would be approved by the military (Nohrstedt 1992).

In entering the 2003 Iraq War, a different media system was put in place. This time, six-hundred journalists were 'embedded' with the troops, protected by the soldiers in the field. They dressed like the troops and even slept in the same quarters. This was a clever tactic devised by the Bush Administration. It allowed for the journalists to become close with the soldiers and to feel like they also were part of the war effort, therefore losing their objectivity and framing their stories in a way sympathetic to the war. The human cost of the war was almost never shown in American media, thanks to these embedded journalists, self-censorship, and secret directives that conducted "covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policy makers world-wide" (Hiebert 2003).

## **Overview and Discussion of Current Research**

Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett 1999). As many scholars and writers on the topic of media coverage of the Gulf and Iraq wars will agree, both George Bush Sr. and his son George W. Bush used propaganda and deception to sway public opinion in favor of their political agendas.

Douglas Kellner, author of several books on social theory, suggests in his work that after the events of September 11 “the images and discourses of the US television networks framed the 9/11 attacks to whip up war hysteria, while failing to provide a coherent account of what happened, why it happened, and what would count as responsible responses,” (Kellner 2004). Kellner also argues that George W Bush uses Manichean discourse to construct the “evil Other.” Bush used the word ‘evil’ to describe the terrorists five times in his first statement after the 9/11 attacks (Kellner 2004). Moreover, his use of “I,” “we,” and “you” serves as a rhetorical device to bind himself with the country (Kellner 2004). These devices were used as a way of mobilizing the American audience into a war hungry nation, reeling for revenge. Furthermore, Deepa Kumar, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, contends that “the atmosphere of charged patriotism after 9/11 not only promoted self-censorship but also squelched debate” (Kumar 2006). This allowed for the Bush Administration to carry out their war in Afghanistan without much public outcry. This atmosphere also allowed for Bush to make his case that Iraq had something to do with September 11. Bush was able to do this so successfully that “polls taken at the end of 2002 and in early 2003 reflect [that] almost half of all Americans believed that there was a connection between Iraq and 9/11, and many believed that several of the hijackers were Iraqi, though none of them were” (Kumar, 2006).

Kumar contends that the connection between 9/11 and Iraq was made through three strategies. The first was to present facts with a disclaimer of uncertainty, so that when the evidence was proved false, the credibility of the source could be maintained by blaming faulty intelligence (Kumar 2006). The second was to establish guilt through suggestion: by mentioning

Iraq and al Qaeda in the same breath and by constantly repeating the connection, a link was established (Kumar 2006). The third strategy was to establish guilt through speculation, “which consisted of projecting imaginary scenarios of what a possible alliance between al Qaeda and Iraq could mean” (Kumar 2006).

In the SBS documentary “Operation Saddam: America’s Propaganda Battle,” it is asserted that the Gulf War and the Iraq War are similar in the fact that one was started based on a fake atrocity (the baby incubator story) and the other based on a fake threat of weapons of mass destruction. Ray Eldon Hiebert claims that “the Weapons of Mass Destruction story line, both nuclear and biological, probably worked in the U.S. because mainstream mass media raised few questions about it, even though media in most of the rest of the world remained highly skeptical,” and that “the ultimate success of propaganda techniques depend on whether the information target has other sources that counter the propaganda” (Hiebert 2003). Hiebert also contends that U.S. government succeeded with propaganda because “Americans tend to think that propaganda is used only by other countries” (qtd. in Hiebert 2003). The truth, however, is quite the contrary. Early in George W. Bush’s administration, the Defense Department instructed the military to establish an Office of Strategic Influence to conduct operations aimed at influencing public opinion (Hiebert 2003). After the plan was leaked, Donald Rumsfeld said it would have to be carried out anyway, even if it was under a different name (Hiebert 2003).

As part of the propaganda scheme, the military and public relations firms came up with the idea of embedded journalism, as opposed to the pool system that defined media coverage of the Gulf War. “The biggest and most important public relations innovation of the Iraq War was the embedding of about six-hundred journalists with the troops doing the actual



fighting,” (Hiebert 2003). A great debate emerged around the embedded reporters and whether these reporters who depended on the U.S. military for protection... could be objective and critical of their protectors (Kellner 2004). Kellner insists it was clear from the beginning that the embedded reporters were indeed “in bed with” their military minders, and as the troops stormed Iraq, “the reporters presented exultant and triumphant accounts that trumped any paid propagandist” (Kellner 2004). Conversely, a study done by Cynthia King and Paul Martin Lester found that “the embedding procedure was a progressive step in [the process of covering the rigors of war]” (King 2005). King and Lester use framing theory to suggest that the differences in pooled versus embedded journalistic practices could significantly impact the way each war was framed (King 2005). They also insist that “editors should make sure that the complete story of the war is being presented to the readers back home” (King 2005). Then again “at home...dissent is muffled out of fear of appearing unpatriotic, and self-censorship in the media takes place,” and “when The New York Times apologizes for its uncritical coverage of the 2003 Iraqi conflict, it is a pretty good clue that wartime-like patriotism has won over once cherished democratic norms” (Snow 2006). Another study done by Julia Fox and Byungho Park compared the use of personal pronouns in embedded and non-embedded reporters during the CNN coverage of the “Shock and Awe” campaign. In their analysis, they claim that “given the unique situation of the embedded reporter, refraining from the use of personal pronouns would be impractical at best” (Fox 2006).

These authors and scholars make clear, concise points that on the whole, I agree with. Although embedding soldiers seems like it would be an improvement from the pool system, allowing reporters to get close to the battle lines, it has only made their stories less objective, giving the American people a

false sense of the war in Iraq. The scholarly comparison of the two wars allows for what may be deemed a “repeat performance” by the two Bush administrations. It is interesting to see how the media plays into the government’s hand when it comes to gaining ‘information at the source’ because of the constant deadlines of 24 hour television and the need to always have new news.

### **TIME Magazine Case Study**

In my particular case study, I looked at the covers of TIME Magazine from the issue immediately following September 11, 2001 until one month after the ‘attack on Iraq’: September 14, 2001 to April 28, 2003. I explored this topic from a political economy and agenda-setting methodological approach. TIME Magazine publishes one magazine per week, and between these dates, there were 86 issues. Of these issues, 41 had cover stories pertaining to September 11, Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush and his plan for war, and other stories such as the Anthrax scare meant to alarm and ‘inform’ the public. Of the remaining 45 issues, 11 had smaller headlines above the TIME title or smaller titles in the corner pertaining in some way to the war, with titles such as “Special Report: Terror’s New Targets” and “Countdown to War.” In the weeks immediately following the attack on September 11, there were 11 issues in a row which has the terror threat, Osama bin Laden, Afghanistan, or some form of patriotism as a theme between the dates of September 24, 2001 and December 3, 2001.

After examining the photographs chosen for the front covers of these 41 issues, I have come to agree with Ted Spiker who wrote, “The images in the news can stir emotions and foster public outcry like no other means of expression. Photographs in news reports, even those that are descriptive, are

‘more than décor’” (quoted in King 2005). How a story is framed influences the way issues are understood by an audience. In the case of TIME Magazine cover photography, readers or consumers that may just glance at the cover would have been influenced by the emotionally charged combination of the cover image and the bold eye catching titles. The patriotic images in the media begin right away after 9/11. The cover of TIME on September 24, 2001 is of George W. Bush standing on a pile of rubble from the fallen towers, holding up an American flag with a straight arm, while a New York fireman smiles behind him. The title reads “One Nation, Indivisible,” the smaller title reads “America digs out- and digs in, Special Issue.” Instead of ‘TIME’ in all red letters, the ‘T’ is red, the ‘I’ is white, the ‘M’ is blue, and the ‘E’ is black. The following week showed a close up of Osama bin Laden with the large title “TARGET: BIN LADEN.”

After analyzing these 41 covers and 11 small front cover titles using political economy and agenda setting methods, I have concluded that TIME Magazine uses eye catching images and short bold titles both to get the attention of the potential reader, telling them what the story of the week is, in turn telling them what stories they should think about, as well as to impress the owners with their bold ‘Special Reports.’ I also found that TIME Magazine also had some doubts regarding the administration and voiced them in titles such as “While America Slept: What Bush knew before 9/11, why so little was done, how the system is still broken,” and “Can Bush Sell the War? Can Saddam Strike Back?” These titles indicated TIME Magazine also reflected doubts that a number of the American people had surrounding the Bush Administration’s agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Media management during times of war has changed a great deal since Vietnam. During the Gulf War, reporters and stories were controlled using the pool system; conversely, the Iraq War with embedded journalists. The media's compliance to the government's use of propaganda and their ability to sway public opinion allowed the Bush administrations to carry out their political agendas without any apparent hesitation from the government or the American people.

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## Social Construction of Taste

Vanessa Williams and Blair Joyal

In today's world our identities are often shaped by the environments in which we grow up. Everyday practices such as eating and socializing are typically formed and reformed within the style of discourse. Language is a powerful tool with which we create and recreate our social worlds. In the article *Socializing Taste* by Elinor Ochs, the practices of eating within middle-class Caucasian American and Italian families were examined. "Though eating and taste are central to social and moral order, we know little about the mundane practices that socialize children into the world of food" (Ochs 7). Between the two styles of families, the conversations regarding taste were often viewed and expressed as either a necessity or a pleasurable activity. Throughout the study, four major aspects of taste were examined: food as nutrition, a material good, a reward, and as pleasure. Within most American families, food was depicted as a material good, reward, and a necessity above all else. In contrast, amongst the Italian families, their conversations focused on food as more of a pleasurable activity. Because of the crucial variations within the structure of discourse between the American and Italian cultures, children were socialized into significantly different practices of relating to food.

Social constructionism is often very useful for thinking about the ways in which we as members of different cultures relate to and think about food in relation to our own identities. In contrast to modernistic ways of thinking about communication, social constructionism refers to the idea that

meaning is largely created and remade through our interactions with others. This theory holds that meaning itself is constantly changing, adapting, and shifting over time among different peoples and cultures. According to W. Barnett Pearce,

The communication perspective sees all forms of human activity as a recurring, reflexive process in which resources are expressed in practices and in which practices (re)construct resources... In this sense, 'practices' consist in actions... 'resources' comprise the stories, images, symbols, and institutions that persons use to make their world meaningful. (23)

As part of Pearce's theory of social constructionism, cultural resources and practices together form the basis of how we as human beings create and recreate reality. He uses the term cultural resources to describe the objects and ideas we use in everyday life to coordinate with one another and create meaningful interactions. Cultural practices, then, are our cultural resources put together into action to construct and reconstruct meaning as a continuous and fluctuating pattern. Within the Ochs article concerning American and Italian dinner table conversations, language is the cultural *resource* with which each culture defines their social worlds and essentially their acquired tastes. Additionally, the mealtime conversations within these cultures are the cultural *practices* with which language is put into action. In effect, the differences in the style of language when discussing food play a significant role in the formation and reformation of cultural identities. The very structure of language provides us with the tools to make our social worlds unique, including our own individual tastes for certain foods and not others.



According to Burr, “the person you are, your experience, your identity, your ‘personality’ are all the effects of language” (39). Many American children grow up in a culture that prizes food as a necessity and reward above pleasure. In the Ochs article, during an American dinner conversation between Mom and Sally Saxe, Sally learns that dessert is framed as a treat in return for finishing the actual meal.

Mom	[finish your <u>celery</u> .
Sally	[I <u>can</u> ’t! ...
Mom	well then there’s no dessert. (( <i>Sally follows Mom to bathroom, eating celery.</i> ))

Clearly, Mom’s choice of wording constructs the idea that dessert is a reward for eating the celery. This suggests that celery is not a desired item and can therefore later affect how Sally views other vegetables and parts of her meal as a “means to an end,” where one must eat the least pleasurable items to get the most desired item. Conversely, in the Italian interactions, the child’s identity was not as sharply shaped by dessert. Dessert in Italian families was usually a form of exotic fruit or yogurt or food that did not in essence “ruin” the meal with extra calories. In this way, the meal in its entirety was viewed as a pleasurable and social activity rather than a duty needed to be performed with a promise of a sweet at the end.

In addition to how language affects our ways of thinking of food as a reward, it can also determine how we think of food as a form of pleasure. For example, among the Italian family discussions, the parents typically “socialized children into the pleasures of food through discussions of different ways of eating foods, styles of preparing food, and the best places to procure food” (Ochs 32). Specifically, in one interaction among

young Stefania and her Papa, Stefania learns the importance of knowing where to buy a specific type of bread.

Stefania	I'ha comprato? <b>Did he buy it?</b>
Mamma	mh mh <b>Mh mh</b> (1.2)
Papa	[I'ho comprato da Margheri:ta <b>I bought it from Margherita</b>
Stefania	[(( <i>she applauds Papa</i> ))

In this sense, Italian families used their meal-time discourse to convey important cultural ideas of knowing the importance of food in all social aspects. This knowledge is especially significant for a child later in life. According to Sampson, “the social process – namely, dialogue and conversation – precedes, and is the foundation for, any subsequent psychological processes that emerge” (103). Language as a cultural resource is used here within the cultural practice of the mealtime conversation as a way to integrate the child into Italian culture. The Italian way of cultivating particular and individual tastes for the child when they are young is seen as a manner of shaping and forming their identity.

Our words or the way in which we express ourselves through language influences how we feel about food as well as our individual tastes. Many of us are unaware of just how much language as a cultural resource can affect how we feel about food. In Ochs’ article, it becomes clear that most Americans construct our discussions concerning food as being something that is necessary and vital to living whereas the Italians view food as something more pleasurable. It is viewed as both a

means of preserving life in addition to a way of socializing and sharing differences in taste. As a cultural resource, the Italian language offers many more expressions to intensify the likeness for a food.

The Italian discourse on food was brimming with positive affect markers such as diminutives, intensifiers, affirmative particles, refined adjectives, adverbs, lexical terms that finely distinguish sub-types of particular kinds of food...and dative clitic pronouns that refer sympathetically to a family member who especially likes a food item and elicit affiliation with that affect. (Ochs 25)

For example, in one particular Italian interaction, the Fanaro family discusses the delights concerning their meal of clams for dinner. Specifically, little Stefania asks for a hundred clams, which shows her excitement for the meal.

Mamma            C'avevi famina Stefania eh?  
                      **You were a little hungry Stefania**  
                      **hmm?**

                      Ti piacciono le vongolette?  
                      **You like the nice appealing little**  
                      **clams?**

Here, Mamma's use of the Italian language form of *famina* ('little hunger') instead of the usual form of *fame* ('hunger') signifies Stefania's intense satisfaction and delight at the clams. Because the Italian language has such a wide range of affirmative expressions relating to food, mealtimes are not considered tortuous or a simple "means to an end," as dinner

can sometimes seem for many American children. The American cultural resources for describing how good a food is are very limited or rare, thereby leaving us with fewer options to express our likes and dislikes about food. In one particular interaction with the Schultz family during dinnertime, the mother directs the daughter in telling her father about the good lunch she had during the day. Because the mother guided the conversation instead of letting Lucy tell her own story, the interaction was somewhat forced and seemed awkward at times (Ochs 33). In opposition to the Italian language, the English language does not have an extensive repertoire of modifiers and affirmative expressions to create such positive effects toward food.

Elinor Ochs' article about American and Italian family dinner interactions shows us that although each have similar goals of eating to sustain life, the Italian language offers more of a pleasure in relating and expressing different tastes of food than the English language does. In *Socializing Taste*, during American exchanges at the dinner table between parents and children, "eating [was often] reduced to an obligation" (Ochs 16) rather than a pleasurable social activity. According to Reddy, "merely by opening our mouths and speaking English we can be drawn into a very real and serious frame conflict" (285). It appears as though because we speak English, we are both blessed and cursed in using our cultural resource to express (and not be able to express) certain likes and dislikes for various types of food. Language as a cultural resource within the practice of mealtime conversations can often tell us something about who we are as a member of society. It is well known that the Italian culture is centralized around food as a pleasurable item and social practice whereas in America, eating is reserved as an activity that is necessary and can be rewarded instead of food being the reward itself. Clearly, the way in which each

culture structures their language and expressions as separate cultural resources within the cultural practice of conversations can have serious impacts in how we relate to one another about food and our identities.

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## **Hugo Chavez Address to U.N. General Assembly**

**Andrew Carslaw**

### **Introduction**

"The devil came here yesterday... and it smells of sulfur still today." Those words echoed through the auditorium along with laughter and applause in New York City at the site of the 2006 United Nations General Assembly. President Bush, who has referred to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as "Mr. Danger or simply 'asshole'" (Foer 97), commented on being called the devil by dismissing "Chavez's remarks as the raving of a reckless political leader" (Lynch A14). This small battle of name-calling is only the tip of the iceberg in a much larger ideological conflict that has existed throughout the years. However, this ideological conflict may be on the verge of developing into a disastrous full-scale military conflict. How can we, as Americans, look beyond our ideological constraints and break through our popular discourses to understand this situation?

In Kenneth Burke's essay, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'," he shows the importance of critically analyzing someone who is considered the most evil man in history. He says, in a way, that it is important to forget our ideological beliefs and approach Hitler's rhetoric in such a way that it allows us to see the full context and reality of his rise to power and his ability to create such a following. Too many times, Burke says, reviewers dismiss ideas as the ranting of evil men to find "favorable reception among the decent members of our population" (Burke). By doing this, they contribute more to our gratification than to our enlightenment (Burghardt 188). Instead of immediately demonizing a man who we all could

learn from, we should adopt a semi-sympathetic approach and take into account the historical context in which he lived. In taking this approach, we may know what to guard against or whether or not to guard at all.

Americans are told that Hugo Chavez is a dangerous man. In examining the context in which Chavez spoke to the United Nations General Assembly, we may be able to learn how the world views the United States in today's world order. We might also be able to decide for ourselves whether or not President Chavez is a danger to the people of the United States, as well as decide if the U.S. is adopting a useful role in the world. In order to explore these issues, it is important to understand ideological constraints that influence a traditional American mode of thinking. These ideological constraints are largely formed and reinforced by the American media and are considered popular public opinion. One aspect of mediated information that dominates American culture is the idea that, when it comes to world affairs, America is always fighting for "the good" and those who speak out against American power are evil.

The American characterization of Chavez is born out of a frame formulated within popular discourse in the United States. From the moment Chavez won election in 1998, the U.S. news media began creating an anti-Chavez sentiment among Americans in the way the stories about Chavez were framed. In 1998, a New York Times headline read, "Venezuelans Elect an Ex-Coup Leader as Their President" (Schemo 1998), a story that forced Americans to ask what dangers might exist in having an ex-coup leader in power. Throughout his presidency, Chavez has been negatively framed. He is often referred to as a friend of Fidel Castro and other third-world leaders who have been labeled American enemies. His democratic values are often questioned and his push for socialism in Venezuela is often

scrutinized. A New York Times article in April of 1999 asked whether the new Venezuelan leader was a democrat or a dictator, choosing the identity of dictator by telling Americans that he is “threatening to impose a state of national emergency, which would allow him to suspend constitutional guarantees and to rule by decree” (Rohter 1999). The U.S. government feared a collapse of Venezuela’s economy in the early years of Chavez’s presidency, which may have led to this push in anti-Chavez discourse immediately following his election. Because of the fear of America’s dependence on foreign oil sources, Chavez became less of a friendly leader toward the U.S. as his reforms began to take place.

History has shown us the consequences of going against the will of the American government. Chavez, like many American enemies (e.g., Manuel Noriega in Panama and Salvador Allende in Chile), made the mistake of denouncing U.S. presence in the region (among other things). Some governments have survived those mistakes and some have been toppled. It is important, before labeling Chavez as friend or foe, to critically examine the accusations he made on September 20, 2006: (1) that the US acts as an imperialist force over the countries of the world; (2) that the Democracy of elites, as he says, want to impose a system of exploitation, pillage and hegemony on the world; and (3) that President Chavez’s claims are the ranting of an irrational mind.

To critically analyze Chavez’s speech, it is important to understand the hegemonic ideologies that he challenges. It is also important to examine the historical context in which the Bolivarian Revolution took hold of a country, and with a new President, changed the direction of that nation. I will look at historical events in which the U.S. was involved in Latin America in order to see how these opposing ideologies have



formed, and finally challenge, the claims of President Chavez in his address to the United Nations.

### **The Bolivarian Revolution**

The Bolivarian Revolution, as named by President Chavez, is a re-energized revolution that began many years ago with Simon Bolivar. Bolivar was part of the fight for independence for numerous Latin American countries including Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, Bolivia and the country whose president has brought the independence struggle back to the front of his political agenda, Venezuela. In the early 1800's, after spending many years studying the works of Rousseau and other democratic thinkers, Bolivar began the struggle for independence from Spanish imperialism. He developed ideas of what he called Pan-Americanism, which were molded from republican ideas of Rousseau. These were ideas that included a general public working for the common good of all citizens. For Bolivar, public participation resembled that of ancient Greek life, where citizens found pleasure in using their leisure time to participate in public matters and government. "What Bolivar fought for was the inviolable sovereignty of territory culture" (Castro-Klaren 47). Bolivar saw the people of Latin America as people of a unique culture, separate from the Spanish and Americans control. He believed in his people defining this culture. He also believed in the governmental structures within the culture as he laid out designs for new political organizations and constitutions.

Although Bolivar fought for independence from the Spanish, I mention Americans too as imposing control over these cultures because of a new battle that emerged as a result of the Monroe Doctrine. During the Monroe Presidency, the Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, showed his dislike for cooperation between the U.S. and developing nations of the

South (Castro-Klaren 44). As the U.S. claimed rights to Latin and South American territories from Europe, they failed to include Latin American leaders like Simon Bolivar. Bolivar saw the Monroe Doctrine as “U.S. attempts to redefine Pan-Americanism for the purpose of furthering markets and trade” (Castro-Klaren 37). This increased the distance and suspicion of the United States and its associated Capitalism. Simon Bolivar died in 1830 at the age of forty-seven (Castro-Klaren 25). Although he freed several nations from the imperialist grip of Spain, the battle for true freedom of these countries had only just begun.

### **“I Think God Sent Him... He’s the Reincarnation of Simon Bolivar.”**

The popular support for President Hugo Chavez in his country is like nothing any American President has ever seen. Coming out of the poor community and gaining more popularity through a failed military coup in 1992, President Chavez “is the first leader who generally cares for the nation’s poor majority” (D. Lynch 1B). Chavez has brought the Bolivarian Revolution back to the front of Venezuelan politics with his attacks on American imperialism and dominance over nations of the world.

As a child, Hugo Chavez saw Simon Bolivar as a hero. Chavez memorized Bolivar’s speeches and re-enacted Bolivar’s crossing the Andes to free Latin America (Foer 96). He joined the military and, in secrecy, a band of freedom fighters attempting to free Venezuela from the kind of democracy it had become. After Venezuela had abandoned dictatorship for democracy in 1958, oil revenues allowed the government to build an infrastructure and a stable economy (Foer 98). However, only few citizens were prospering in this thriving economy and the slums in the hills around Caracas became

some of the worst living conditions the country had ever seen. Many people lacked running water and education. "By the 1980's, lower oil prices left the country with a corrupt government and a citizenry that was deeply disappointed with its economic fortunes" (Foer 98). It was this government that Hugo Chavez and his rebellion attempted to overthrow in 1992. Although they failed, Chavez's public address calling for an end to his rebellion brought him much sympathy and popularity. After being pardoned by the newly elected President in 1993, Chavez began campaigning and won the Presidency in 1999.

With Bolivar's Pan-American dreams in mind, Chavez went to work restructuring the Venezuelan government to be what he called "socialism of the twenty-first century" (D. Lynch 2B). Because Venezuela was the fourth largest supplier of oil to the world and only few had benefited from it, he promised to redistribute the nation's oil wealth so that all Venezuelans could prosper from the rewards. This idea did not sit well with the elites of the nation and went against Washington's idea of capitalism. Chavez also promised to involve people in the political process. This helped him gain support from the poor who had been left out by the previous governments. "Chavez saw it as his role to make the public aware of their rights" (Bartley 8:09). He drafted a new constitution that incorporated these rights of the citizens and also put a limit of six years on the term of the presidential seat. His government printed this constitution so that all citizens could read their rights and started a weekly television and radio show where people could call in and ask questions of the President. This was an attempt to make public officials more accessible to those who were supposed to be the power holders in a democracy – the people.

An interesting point was made in a documentary entitled, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." This documentary described the high level of media censorship

under previous governments, claiming that Chavez allowed total freedom of expression. This newfound freedom created a battle between elite and popular discourses. Most of the television stations in Venezuela are privately owned by wealthy, privately owned oil production companies. These elite discourses oppose Chavez's policies because he nationalized the country's oil production; which shut down the private oil businesses. Of course, the elite discourses of Venezuela support U.S. discourses claiming that Chavez is a dictator and a danger to the world. Fortunately for Chavez, the poor make up eighty percent of the Venezuelan population. Therefore, these elitist discourses are mostly dismissed and his support remains strong.

By looking at these historical events, one can see how they shape Venezuelan ideologies. The struggle for independence from the Spanish, the Monroe Doctrine, and the way that the majority of Venezuelans were kept poor under conditions of capitalism and the free market system have all played a role in the formation of popular ideologies in the region. With the new President in 1999 came new hope for prosperity among the nation's poor, and on September 20, 2006, President Chavez spoke of his desire to bring together the poor countries of the world against this still oppressive form of imperialism. Chavez referred to President Bush as "the spokesman of imperialism." As an imperialist, Bush's mission in Venezuela was "to try and preserve the current pattern of domination, exploitation and pillage of the peoples of the world."

### **Ideological Conflict across Borders**

In the same way that historical events shaped Venezuela's view of the world, historical events have shaped American ideologies, although much of the shaping comes through propaganda and governmental rhetoric. The United

States holds a view of the world that is dominated by extreme ethnocentrism. By this I mean that Americans, throughout history, have tended to view other cultures in comparison to their own. In the time of the westward expansion it was called manifest destiny, the God-given right for America to violently take over Native American soil. This belief that God had granted Americans the knowledge and power to dominate the world lasted for many years. Some would argue, as I would, that this belief still exists at the heart of American government and foreign policy today.

In Chavez's U.N. address, he asked the world to read Noam Chomsky's Hegemony or Survival. This book accuses the U.S. of perpetuating ideas of manifest destiny. Chomsky says that, for more than half a century, the United States has pursued a foreign policy that would ensure its dominance over the world. Of the latest foreign policy maneuvers, the Bush administration declared its National Security Strategy in 2002, "which declared the right to resort to force to eliminate any perceived challenge to U.S. global hegemony, which is to be permanent" (Chomsky 2). Manifest destiny still exists in certain forms today, although now the assumption that it is God's will for America to rule the world is left out.

Chomsky (6) talks about Walter Lippman's notion of manufacturing consent. The manufacturing of consent refers to the use of propaganda to create consent among citizens to follow governmental agendas and "elude public opinion entirely" (Chomsky 6). Through both ethnocentric discourses and the manufacturing of consent, many Americans tend to believe that their ways of viewing the world are the "norm" or the "right" way. Because of the way these ideologies are forced on American minds, most citizens tend to hold the belief that the U.S. always takes a humanitarian approach to conflict in the world, never becomes involved in wars for economic reasons

and that foreign policy decisions are made with the interests of the people of the world in mind. In many instances though, these beliefs have been proven false and then covered up. Since the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. has been involved in conflicts in most Latin American countries. In none of these conflicts has the U.S. taken a humanitarian approach and in all of them one can find an economic rationale for intervention.

The most brutal of these interventions came during the Cold War. The 1954 invasion of Guatemala came after Jacobo Arbenz nationalized some of the country's land that had been previously owned by the United Fruit Company. As a result, the CIA overthrew Arbenz and, in the following years, about 200,000 Guatemalan natives were murdered (Moyers). This conflict in Guatemala is an example of false American beliefs. The U.S. is portrayed as not being involved in foreign countries for economic reasons. The use of propaganda directed at the American people helped solidify this false belief by playing on Americans' fear of communism. The communist hysteria during the Cold War helped the media and U.S. government cover up this instance of economic intervention by portraying, in the Guatemalan case, Arbenz as a communist leader stealing privately owned land.

In another instance where false American beliefs prevailed, the U.S. launched an attack on Panama in 1989 to oust General Manuel Noriega from power. Noriega, who had been on the CIA's payroll for helping with the flow of arms to the Contras in Nicaragua and Honduras, quickly became an enemy of the U.S. by supporting an end to U.S. intervention in Central America. As a result, nearly 4,000 Panamanians were killed (Trent). Like the other secret wars in Latin America, the invasion of Panama was framed in the U.S. news as an overthrowing of a dictatorship with the support of the citizens. The stories were covered from the White House using President

Bush and his administration as the sources of information. By not allowing the news media to gain access to Panama during the invasion, the Bush administration forced journalists to permit officials to frame the events. This made the Panama invasion look, to the American people, like a humanitarian project, aimed at freeing Panamanians from oppressive rule.

Both of these examples show some of the ways in which the U.S. government can use the media to create popular discourse among Americans. Through the use of propaganda, media censorship and governmental rhetoric, American ideologies are formed and often reinforced to incorporate certain values that the facts and truth might destroy. Another reason for bringing up these brutal attacks on Latin American countries is because President Chavez has committed the same faults as both of these leaders. As mentioned earlier, Chavez nationalized the Venezuelan oil fields, like Arbenz with United Fruit Company's land in Guatemala. Chavez also has repeatedly denounced U.S. presence in Latin America like Noriega in Panama. In his address to the U.N., Chavez blatantly denounced President Bush and other U.S. officials for the military presence of American troops and imperialism around the globe saying, "the American empire is doing all that it can to consolidate its system of domination... we cannot allow world dictatorship to be consolidated." Chavez views these conflicts in Latin America, as well as other examples of U.S. military intervention, as the imperialism against which he speaks.

By asking the audience and, as Chavez put it, "our brothers and sisters in the United States," to read Hegemony or Survival, he is asking the world, and especially Americans, to challenge their ideological beliefs. As mentioned, Americans tend to believe that the U.S. does things for the right reasons. Chavez challenges Americans to put their beliefs to the test. One ideological challenge Chavez offers very subtly. This is the

challenge to America's ideological belief in humanitarian intervention. To do this, he separates the American people from the American government by first quoting President Bush's U.N. address. "I have come to speak directly to the populations of the Middle East, to tell them that my country wants peace" (Chavez 2006). Chavez goes on to say that if you walk the streets of America, the citizens will say that they want peace. "But the government doesn't want peace. It wants to exploit its system... of hegemony through war." He asks the audience, "What's happening in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine? What's happened over the last one-hundred years in Latin America and in the world? And now threatening Venezuela" (Chavez 2006). By separating the American people from their government, he puts no fault on the people for the crimes of the U.S. government and asks them if the U.S. has been pursuing intervention on the grounds of human rights.

Chomsky raises a good point about humanitarian interventions. He asks, "Why were the 1990's considered 'the decade of humanitarian intervention' but not the 1970's?" (Chomsky 22). He offers two examples since World War II where a resort to force actually put an end to serious atrocities. In 1971, India's invasion of East Pakistan put an end to mass slaughter and other horrors. In 1978, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia ended atrocities committed by Pol Pot. Chomsky then answers his own question by saying that these "examples of intervention that terminated huge atrocities were carried out by the wrong people" (Chomsky 22). He even points out that in both cases the U.S. was opposed to these interventions. To be the leader among humanitarian interventions with "forces of freedom," as President Bush often refers to U.S. forces, the U.S. must take action in hiding the human rights effort of other countries, especially where the U.S. was opposed, and promote



discourse featuring America as the strongest supporter of human rights.

The 1990's proved to be the decade of humanitarian intervention around the world, but was it really the beginning of an era dedicated to human rights? According to American ideologies it was. The idea of a new right to intervene on humanitarian grounds came from conflicts in Kosovo and East Timor (Chomsky 22). Atrocities in Kosovo brought a debate between the U.S. and the U.N. on intervention, but while the two powers fought over who should intervene, "violence surged in Kosovo" resulting in "an ethnic cleansing campaign that drove more than half the Albanian population into exile" (Chomsky 55). Most believe that the March 24 bombing campaign by NATO put an end to the violence and bloodshed, but later reports indicated that about five-hundred Albanians had been killed prior to the conflict, leaving the other 1,500 of the total 2,000 murders occurring after the bombing (Chomsky 57). In East Timor, the U.S. and British-supported Indonesian military escalated the atrocities that had been occurring since 1975, killing nearly 200,000 people in 1999 (Chomsky 53). The Clinton administration reacted by saying, "East Timor is the responsibility of the government of Indonesia, and we don't want to take that responsibility away from them" (Chomsky 54). Several months passed as the atrocities continued until Clinton announced that Washington would no longer support these crimes. When the U.S. withdrew their support, the Indonesian military pulled out of East Timor, "allowing an Australian-led U.N. peacekeeping force to enter unopposed" (Chomsky 54).

With respect to the conflicting ideologies between America and Venezuela, some opposing media discourses immediately following the attempted overthrow of President Chavez in 2002 need to be examined. I mentioned earlier the

condition of Venezuelan “democracy” before Chavez was elected. The same elite group who controlled both political parties also controlled the media and had become powerful through the country’s oil revenues producing president after president from within this elite community. By gaining power from outside of this community of elites, Chavez became a heroic symbol among the poor, which frightened the elite community and the U.S. government. After Chavez denounced U.S. presence in Latin America, following his belief in the Monroe Doctrine’s establishment of American imperialism over the western hemisphere, the U.S. became more and more concerned with Chavez and his government. As a result of Chavez’s policies, his denouncement of U.S. imperialism and his nationalization of Venezuelan oil fields, anger soon rose between the Chavez supporters and opponents.

In April of 2002, a clash between demonstrators occurred in front of the presidential palace and shots rang out. Many believe that the CIA was behind the clash, which resulted in an overthrow of President Chavez (Bartley). After only two days, Chavez supporters reclaimed control and demanded that Chavez be set free and returned to his presidential duties. The Bush Administration, which showed no regret when the elected president Chavez was ousted, advised him upon his return “to make good use of his second chance “by correcting his course and governing in a fully democratic manner” (Olsen A3). Bush administration officials claimed their only involvement in the coup was through meeting with the coalition that sought to oust Chavez and “insisting that the Venezuelans use constitutional means, like a referendum, to effect an overthrow” (Marquis 1).

This type of foreign policy decisions and actions are precisely what President Chavez is asking the world, and Americans, to think critically about. These examples destroy American ideologies about the United States’ presence in the

world. They clearly show that the “normal” American beliefs about the United States’ role in the world can be proven false. Chavez takes the side of Americans in his address to show that he acknowledges Americans’ beliefs in human rights, but attacks the U.S. government for having a different agenda.

### **September 20, 2006**

On September 20, 2006, the United Nations met to deliberate about these important issues. The UN general assembly is composed of representatives from all member states. It is a deliberative body where leaders discuss issues of world affairs. Once a year, these leaders gather and many of them are chosen to speak to the assembly ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)). Chavez spoke the day after President Bush attacked him for his foreign policy decisions and asked all representatives to read Noam Chomsky’s Hegemony or Survival, saying, “It’s an excellent book to help us understand what has been happening in the world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” For many years, Chomsky has been critical of U.S. foreign policy and in this book he offers many ideas and examples that support the accusations made by Chavez. Chomsky accuses the U.S. of the type of dominance and imperialism over the world of which Chavez is seeking to make people aware of. He says, “the hegemonic pretensions of the American empire are placing at... risk the very survival of the human species” (Chomsky). This statement creates a sense of urgency among his audience to accept the truth that the United States’ role in the world is making the world more dangerous for the entire species. He refers to America’s quest for hegemony as “a sword hanging over our heads,” a threat so important for the survival of human beings that it must be halted immediately and it is because of the importance of this issue that he appeals to the people of the United States and the world to put a stop to this quest.

Next, Chavez uses a metaphor that was heard throughout the world. "The devil himself is right in the house." Of course, this refers to President Bush. The quote brought much laughter and applause from the representatives of other countries. By using this metaphor, Chavez accomplished two things. First, he displayed his hatred for the American president allowing him to continue with accusations that would be fitting for the devil. Second, it brought his speech to the front page of newspapers across America. The world news section of The Washington Post was printed with a picture of Chavez and a headline that read, "Venezuelan Leader Demonizes Bush; Chavez Calls President a Racist 'Devil'" (Lynch A14). By turning media attention to him, he was able to reach more Americans with his accusations and make his audience even larger. People who saw the headlines would want to know why he would refer to the leader of the free world as the devil, so they would find the answer to that question among the accusations in his speech.

An interesting accusation he makes questions historical ideas of democratic theory. He discusses how America wants to impose a democratic model, when really "it's the false democracy of elites." Here Chavez is questioning the very ways in which American democracy and capitalism work for the elites of the nation. The very basic principal of democracy is that the people have the power and govern for the good of all. It holds the idea of a general will among the people who work for the common good. This idea did not work in Venezuela when they were considered a democracy by America. The belief in capitalism led to only the few elites of the nation prospering while the majority of the country remained poor. One could argue, as I think Chavez would, that this "democracy of elites" works the same way in the U.S. The 1990's brought America a booming economy, but some have argued that it was only really booming among elites of the nation. While the poor remained

poor, the rich got richer and the middle class was slightly worse off (Meyrowitz). Of this false democracy, Chavez says, "what a strange democracy. Aristotle might not recognize it or others who are at the root of democracy." Chavez is saying that the U.S. democracy is not a real democracy and would not be viewed that way by ancient democratic thinkers.

Chavez attacks America's view of extremists. He quotes President Bush saying "Anywhere you look; you hear extremists telling you that you can escape from poverty and recover your dignity through violence, terror and martyrdom." Chavez's attack here is on Americans who are labeled as extremists. In an alternate view, the people President Bush refers to as extremists could be seen as freedom fighters or patriots. While the U.S. is occupying Iraq, Iraqis are fighting their occupiers. When the British were occupying America during the American Revolution those who fought to free the country from this occupation were called patriots. If you view the war in Iraq as an imperialist occupation, like the British in the United States, these so-called extremists become revolutionary war heroes. Chavez says, "The imperialists see extremists everywhere. It's not that we are extremists, it's that the world is waking up and people are standing up." He views the U.S. as an imperialist force and these "extremists" as standing up for their freedom.

An important attack Chavez makes is against the United Nations system itself. "The U.N. system, born after the Second World War, collapsed. It's worthless." Chavez views the UN as a deliberative organ with no power. He proposed some solutions to address this problem. He said that developing countries should be able to gain access as permanent members of the Security Council, the council that now consists of six members, one being the United States. He believes that the U.N. needs to develop effective methods to address and resolve world conflict

and strengthen the roles and powers of the secretary general. Of these proposals, the most important one is “the immediate suppression... of the anti-democratic mechanism known as the veto, the veto on the decisions of the Security Council” (Chavez 2006). This is important because of how the vetoes have been used in the past. He offers the example of the United States vetoing a decision that allowed Israel to destroy Lebanon. This lack of power from the U.N. is a problem Chavez seeks to fix by bringing it to the attention of the world.

## **Conclusion**

When ideological constraints are lost, one can look critically at Chavez’s accusations and find them justifiable. The United States’ role in the world, as we have seen throughout history, seems to have little concern for human rights. Third world nations have experienced the wrath of a world dominated by one superpower. I agree with Chavez. These nations are standing up against this new form of imperialism, in search of a freedom that many have not yet experienced. It seems as though, according to U.S. actions, freedom can only come to these countries through the aid of America. However, too often America has lost the respect of the world by pursuing a course of action that has little concern for human rights, but great concern with the attainment of economic goals.

Chavez attempted to show Americans a view of the world that is seen mostly outside of the United States. If Americans could see this view of the world, we may be able to change the very dangerous path we’re taking and put an end to the oppression of third world citizens. For the purpose of securing a safe future for the world, we must be able to question our own ideological beliefs. By doing this, we may find a safer path to take so we can hold on to hope of a prosperous future for all of mankind.

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# Enactment of the Ritual Drama: News Coverage of the Columbine School Shooting

Heidi Soucy

## Introduction

The news media is a primary source of information about current events for most Americans and populations of the Western world. While journalists and news programs are supposedly objective conveyors of information, the linguistic nature of the media dictates that some level of impartiality is included in every news story. By choosing which aspects of an event to report and which to exclude, and even the words used to describe those aspects, news broadcasters have a degree of rhetorical power over public response. Examining media coverage without the pretext that the words are true presents opportunities to uncover rhetorical acts.

When a major newsworthy event occurs, the public is immediately inundated with media coverage that actually shapes the reality of the event for the audience. Kenneth Burke, in his essay "Terministic Screens," asserts that "even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (45). Since there are potentially multiple ways to describe a single situation or event, the words chosen inherently represent choices about what is deemed important or worthy. Thus, in presenting information, media coverage portrays only a portion of any story while automatically disregarding other parts of the theoretical "whole story."

By no means is the negation of certain aspects of events or information always unintentional. News stories are just that—stories—and the method of storytelling has a powerful effect on how the presented information is received. The idea of linguistic interaction as storytelling is suggested by Burke: “[h]uman relations should be analyzed with respect to the leads discovered by a study of drama” (“On Persuasion” 310). The utilization of dramatic framework for the analysis of language and its responses is helpful in understanding the effects of storytelling in the media on public response.

### **Abstract**

This essay will focus on the news coverage following the shooting at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. I will argue that the media portrayal of the incident exemplifies Kenneth Burke’s theories regarding terministic screens and ritual drama.

According to Burke, since “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (“Terministic” 45), a synopsis of the events at Columbine will produce a response, whether intentional or not. However, citing the final police report, released in May of 2000 after a 13-month investigation, allows some level of objectivity. According to the report, the two shooters were Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, both Columbine students. The two gunmen were armed with four weapons including a tec-9 and sawed-off shotgun, as well as duffel bags of pipe bombs. Shooting began around 11:19 a.m., as well as scattered explosions from planted bombs; Klebold and Harris are thought to have committed suicide around noon. In total twelve students, one teacher, and the two gunmen were killed; twenty-three were injured. (“Officials...”)

The materials I have used to analyze the use of Burke's theories are actual news articles from newspapers on local (The Denver Post) and national (The Washington Post) levels, as well as television coverage on major networks. Most of the print news utilized is from the days and weeks immediately following the shootings, when much was still unknown and speculation abounded. According to a narrative timeline constructed through analysis of fire department and 911 dispatch records, surveillance cameras, and the school's fire alarm system, news coverage of the Columbine shooting began at 11:47 a.m., after the last of the victims was killed, but before the two gunmen committed suicide (Dispatch). The rapid onset of media attention when little was known about the incident led to the creation of headlines such as "High School Massacre Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead" (Obmascik 1). The fact that the death count listed in this April 21, 1999 headline is almost double the actual count suggests the extent to which word choice can have an immense effect on perceived reality.

### **Theory and Analysis**

This essay will rely mainly on the theories of Kenneth Burke to guide an analysis of linguistic devices in the Columbine coverage; namely, the previously mentioned terministic screens and ritual drama. To elaborate on the idea of terministic screens, it must be understood "how fantastically much of our 'Reality' could not exist for us, were it not for our profound and inveterate involvement in symbol systems" (Burke, Terministic 48). The use of capitalization here is ironic, as Burke is suggesting that the "Reality" a person lives in is really one of many realities based in symbolic interaction. He clearly states the pervasiveness of the screens in the following passage:

We must use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its way of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. (50)

Here Burke suggests that, as language-using beings, humans must make linguistic choices to express, describe, or make sense of situations. The nature of language itself requires that, in that choice, some other available words are "deflected." Whether intentional or not, the chosen words carry connotations that alternatives may not. The rhetorical power in this case lies in distinguishing how a speaker's linguistic choices can or have affected the audience's response.

Ritual drama, though related to the theory of terministic screens, has some important differences. The focus of this theory is far wider than the former, dealing not with single terms or phrases, but with symbolic representations of life situations in dramatic metaphor. The ritual drama is less an analysis of language and more an organizational framework for analyzing life itself through dramatic metaphor. Burke writes that "the social world lends itself to dramatic description" (Philosophy 103), at least in part because social life is dramatic in its own right. In fact, later in the book he compares the two:

The difference between the symbolic drama and the drama of living is a difference between imaginary and real obstacles. But: the imaginary obstacles of symbolic drama must, to have the relevance necessary for the

producing of effects upon audiences, reflect the real obstacles of living drama. (312)

Essentially, symbolic drama allows for identification by the audience by reflecting what audience members may encounter in their own lives. Symbolic drama provides the audience with "imaginary obstacles" that equip them for real obstacles, but in order to be effective the symbolism must accurately portray those real obstacles; if not, identification cannot occur. Burke incorporates literary and art forms such as "tragedy," "comedy," and "satire" as examples of dramatic symbols that allow situations to be encountered in different ways (304).

Ott and Akoi draw on Burke's ritual drama in their analysis of news coverage following the murder of Matthew Shepard. They cite a theory similar to those mentioned above, called frame analysis. Frame analysis examines how an event is named and the results of that naming. The theory involves the concepts of inclusion and exclusion, emphasizing and deemphasizing, and form (Ott 485). The authors then put forth four phases in the tragic framing of the Shepard murder: naming the event, making a political symbol, expunging the evil within, and restoring the social order (486). These phases will be applied to the Columbine coverage as a supplemental relevant theory.

Upon reviewing the selection of collected news articles and program transcripts, many similarities could be found in the linguistic description of the event at Columbine. *The Denver Post*, the day after the shooting occurred, published an article under the headline "High School Massacre: Columbine Bloodbath Leaves up to 25 Dead" (Obmascik). This headline rather blatantly goes beyond the arena of transmission of information and enters the realm of attention-grabbing sensationalism. By choosing the terms "massacre" and

“bloodbath,” the author ensured that his audience would notice the article.

The terms, also used throughout the text, highlight the gore, violence, and chaos of the scene. The shock value of the story is amplified with the use of words such as “bloody rampage,” “gruesome,” “executed,” “war zone,” “panic,” “carnage,” and “maniacal.” These terms provide ample opportunity for analysis using terministic screens. The reader is presented with a shocking story, which, if Burke’s art forms were applied, might fit more accurately in the horror genre than tragedy. Condolences for those injured and families of victims are never offered—the focus is more on the violent acts themselves than on the consequences.

Burke attests in The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies of Symbolic Action that terministic invitations to consider an event in one way over another “would not have to be ‘leading questions’ in the obvious sense. They would need no ‘weighting’ other than the weighting implicit in the choice of topic itself” (“The Philosophy of Literary Form” 67). The news articles, therefore, do not have to explicitly define the Columbine shooting as any one specific classification of an event to the audience. However, the choice to describe the event with the terms above, focusing on the shooters rather than victims and violence rather than loss, in effect “leads” the audience to assume a particular view.

Descriptions of the scene and how the shooting came to pass are equally as shocking as the individual violent terms dispersed within the accounts. One local newspaper indicated that “the masked shooters first targeted specific victims, especially ethnic minorities and athletes, then randomly sprayed school hallways about 11:30a.m. with bullets and shotgun blasts, witnesses said. The bloody rampage spanned four hours” (Obmascik). According to the final police report

released in May 2000, half of the information presented in this quote is untrue. The shootings were found to be random, without any specific targets based on race or athletic affiliation. The gunfire only lasted for approximately 15 minutes—though there were pipe bomb explosions far later, the gunmen were already dead for about three hours before SWAT teams and police entered the building (“Officials...”).

Evaluations of the dispositions of the two shooters based in the news coverage can also be attributed to Burke’s terministic screens. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were not defined entirely by the fact that they committed this violent crime. The villainous, uncaring murderers are part of one story about the young boys. They were sons, students, and friends before they were killers. The images portrayed in the media, however, were of two angry members of the Trench Coat Mafia group, who “talked often in class about beheading people, and many often sang and quoted songs by shock-rocker Marilyn Manson. Some also wore bands that read, ‘I hate people’” (Obmascik). The entire group of students that identified themselves as the Trench Coat Mafia, Harris and Klebold in particular, were described as preoccupied and fascinated with violence, war, and death. The relationship between emphasizing certain aspects of a person or event while downplaying others, as developed by Burke, Ott, and Akoi is exemplified by the media portrayal of both the event itself and the shooters.

As details of the event and its planning by Klebold and Harris surfaced, media attention shifted focus from reporting what had happened (and how) to *why* it had happened. The so-called “warning signs” displayed by the shooters were presented, and by directing the audience’s attention to behaviors that suggested the potential for violence the media downplayed

those instances in which the shooters were “normal” or “good” kids.

Five days before the Columbine school shooting, Eric Harris had been rejected from enlisting in the Marines because he took a prescription antidepressant. According to the recollection of a classmate, Harris wanted to enlist so he could “shoot everyone” (Achenbach). The preoccupation with violence displayed by the shooters, especially Eric Harris, prior to the event is illustrated in a Washington Post article as a warning sign that they were actually dangerous:

In hindsight there were many clues, many peculiar signs, that Harris, who has emerged as the leader of the rampage, and Klebold, the follower, were actively dangerous, that they weren’t just rebels, or juvenile delinquents, or “Goths” who liked to wear black and listen to German rock bands. (Achenbach)

While the attributes of the shooters listed above are not explicitly labeled as necessary precursors to the violent acts they committed, creating associations between those qualities and two people who committed murder can encourage the connection that anyone who shares these interests is at risk for committing violence. As Burke writes, “every question selects a field of battle, and in this selection it forms the nature of the answer” (“The Philosophy of Literary Form” 67). Naming someone who has already been deemed a violent murderer a “Goth,” for example, carries the connotations that the Goth lifestyle breeds violent thoughts.

The ‘juvenile delinquent’ title is a stretch, as the two shooters had only had minor brushes with the law prior to the Columbine event and no criminal or discipline records (Cornell 7). The reference to German rock bands is interesting, though,



as is the previous mention of Marilyn Manson's music. Metal music tends to be seen as inherently violent and abrasive; the boys' interest in the German group Rammstein was for a time weakly connected to possible Neo-Nazi affiliations. The Denver Post reported an interview with a classmate of Harris' and Klebold's, who recalls asking, "Why do you guys wear all that German stuff? Are you Nazis?" to which they responded, "Yeah, Heil Hitler" (Obmascik). The automatic association between German music and clothing and Nazism was made by the student and adopted by the media. By printing this association, even if not technically agreeing with it, the media was able to form the nature of the answer, or public response.

The warning signs reported in The Washington Post include violent stories composed by Harris in his creative writing classes, citing a childhood memoir in which he described a war game between him and his brother, written from the position that the game was a real battle. A causal link cannot and should not be established between the composers of violently themed works and potential for real-life violence. The media's investigation into the motives for the crime result in little more than speculation, but the associations made by the audience through interpretation of the linguistically presented reality affects not only the perception of the two shooters, but also the criteria for determining what makes a violent or dangerous person.

It is interesting to note that over the course of little more than a week after the shooting at Columbine occurred, the story presented by the media concerning Harris and Klebold changed rather drastically. Reports from April 21, 1999, the day after the shooting, attribute the following to both of the shooters, "they talked obsessively about death, worshipped Adolf Hitler, had a Web site titled 'Top 10 People I Hate and Want to Kill,' and made pipe bombs for fun" (Cornell 7). Initial reports

describe Harris, Klebold, and members of the Trench Coat Mafia in general as angry, racist, and violent with an affinity for Hitler. The fact that the shooting occurred on the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hitler's birth is cited as a meaningful illustration of the group's persona (Cornell 7).

Later reports, like Achenbach's Washington Post article released a little more than a week later, clearly identifies Eric Harris as the "leader" and Dylan Klebold as the "follower" of the so-called massacre. While originally Klebold was included in the characterization of a maniacal murderer, his image was changed drastically to that of an innocent kid poisoned by Eric Harris:

If you knew this kid and you knew what he was like—other than the fact that he was associated with Eric—you would never believe this was possible. [Klebold's parents are] having trouble coming to grips with this situation. It's so unbelievable. With Eric, there were signs, there were red flags everywhere, that were ignored. With Dylan, there was not one sign. Not one. (Achenbach)

Due in part to the fact that Harris had threatened classmates via email messages and on the hate-filled website that he created, he was pinpointed as the true villain by the media while Dylan Klebold was apparently pulled along for the ride. The evolution of the story told by the media, especially when it contradicts itself as it did with the switch from Klebold as ruthless murderer to another victim, has immense rhetorical significance from a dramatic view. Both Harris and Klebold committed the crime at Columbine, whether "warning signs" were exhibited beforehand or not. What does this contradiction say about the audience's desired response?

Ott discusses the media fascination and reliance on drama. He writes:

An event is selected to become a major news story based on its potential for drama [...] The mainstream media [...] focused almost exclusively on two elements, the deplorable motives of [the killers] and the gruesome character of the scene [...] The news media's devotion to drama virtually insured that sensationalistic descriptions [...] would lead every story. (487)

As headlines and terminologies presented above have shown, the Columbine news coverage is guilty of utilizing the same measures in order to create a dramatic story. While the Ott essay describes news coverage following the murder of Matthew Shepard, many of his observations are applicable to news coverage of major media stories in general, specifically those that are "tragically framed," as he calls it.

The framing of an event as tragic consists of four phases presented by Ott: Naming the Event, Making a Political Symbol, Expunging the Evil Within, and Restoring the Social Order (485-94). The media reports about the Columbine shooting clearly named it as a massacre, and in so doing framed the story tragically. Just by using that term, the severity of the crime was described and amplified, and the shooters were automatically distanced from the general public by the attributed levels of anger, hate, and disrespect for human life.

Just as the Matthew Shepard case made a political symbol by acting as a rallying point for anti-hate crime legislature (Ott 488-9), the Columbine shooting was used as a basis for action towards creating safer schools and harsher gun control laws. Metal detectors were installed in schools across the country, and as candlelight vigils were held throughout the

nation (and televised), journalists advised the public to be on the lookout for the “warning signs” displayed by Harris, and to a lesser extent Klebold.

The “scapegoat mechanism” is implemented to rid society of public guilt for shared qualities between the public and the criminal in Ott’s third phase of tragic framing. The process includes an original state of shared ideas or practices between the public and its scapegoat(s); followed by a symbolic division and a new alliance of the public against the scapegoat(s) (Ott 490). This occurs because “symbolic forms that manage guilt can only be ‘successful if the audience is guilty of the sins portrayed in the discourse’” (Ott 490), and “the dramas [can] retain their hold only in so far as the spectators [are] ‘glued’ to them—and one is glued to a work of art only when that work is relieving for him some basic pattern of his own experience, with its appropriate ‘medicine’” (Burke, *Philosophy* 413).

The application of this theory is difficult in the case of the Columbine shooting because there are several parties that could be perceived as scapegoats. First of all, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were scapegoats because the manner in which they killed their classmates demonstrated anger and hatred, emotions which the public is assuredly guilty of feeling at some level. In moments of anger, people often use phrases like “I could kill her” or “I hate you.” However, though the suspected motives are shared by the public and its scapegoats, division is accomplished because the two young shooters were not “controlled enough” to stop themselves from committing violence, thereby separating themselves from the state of shared practices with the public. The uncontrolled anger is a blameworthy and punishable quality. As it resulted in the deaths of the shooters along with their victims, the public’s guilt can be remedied because the act included the punishment.

Parents and law enforcement officials are also scapegoats to some degree in the media coverage. Some articles referred to parents as being “fooled” by Harris and Klebold’s supposed act of nonviolence prior to the shooting (Achenbach). A “Good Morning America” segment concerning Eric Harris’ previous violent behavior stated that when Harris threatened a classmate, the student’s parents contacted police multiple times. The transcript of the program shows reporter John Miller muse, “What might have been different had the police and school gotten more involved with Eric Harris and his threats? Would he have killed? Would Dylan Klebold have been his accomplice? Would 13 others have been saved?” (“Warnings of Trouble”). The qualities being attacked here are obliviousness and inaction. The public is no less guilty of this than the parents of the two shooters and law enforcement, because although the two planned the assault on the school for months beforehand, no one saw it coming.

To target the media as a scapegoat, namely music, violent movies and video games, is interesting because it creates a debate about whether violent people are attracted to violent media, or whether violent media actually inspires violence in people. It is agreed by most that exposure to violence in the media was so widespread, and the violent acts of the scale of Columbine so rare, that no causal link can be rightfully established. A backlash of sorts surfaced, with Marilyn Manson publishing a rebuttal in “Rolling Stone” magazine to reports that his music influenced any violence.

Restoring the social order consists of enacting symbolic closure to the tragic event. The deaths of the shooters acted as symbolic closure, as they were punished for their “evil” deed. When Columbine was reopened for classes, another kind of symbolic closure was created because it represented a return to everyday life. As Ott suggested in his essay on the Matthew

Shepard murder, when news coverage of a public tragedy ends, much of the political and social action begun for its sake also ends (494). Tragic events fade to the back of public memory until a similar event, like the recent school shooting at Virginia Tech, occurs. It will be interesting to note whether the media coverage of that crime, where even more people were killed, will follow the same rhetorical guidelines presented in this essay.

## **Conclusion**

Burke writes in his essay "On Persuasion, Identification, and Dialectical Symmetry" about the power of unintentional rhetorical capacity present in every vocabulary:

Here, of course, we move into those outlying areas of rhetoric wherein an entire vocabulary, much of it arising spontaneously and without a definitely directed rhetorical end, yet has persuasive elements in it. For the mere failure of a vocabulary to draw all the lines at the right places is to a degree malignly persuasive. (335-6)

I do not presume to question whether the news coverage of the Columbine shooting was intentionally or unintentionally rhetorical. I do, however, argue that both the content and form of news reports following the tragedy shaped the public's perception of and reaction to it. Language is not a simple representation of the world; it is a complex tool that, when crafted skillfully, can actually help shape the very nature of the world for an audience.

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